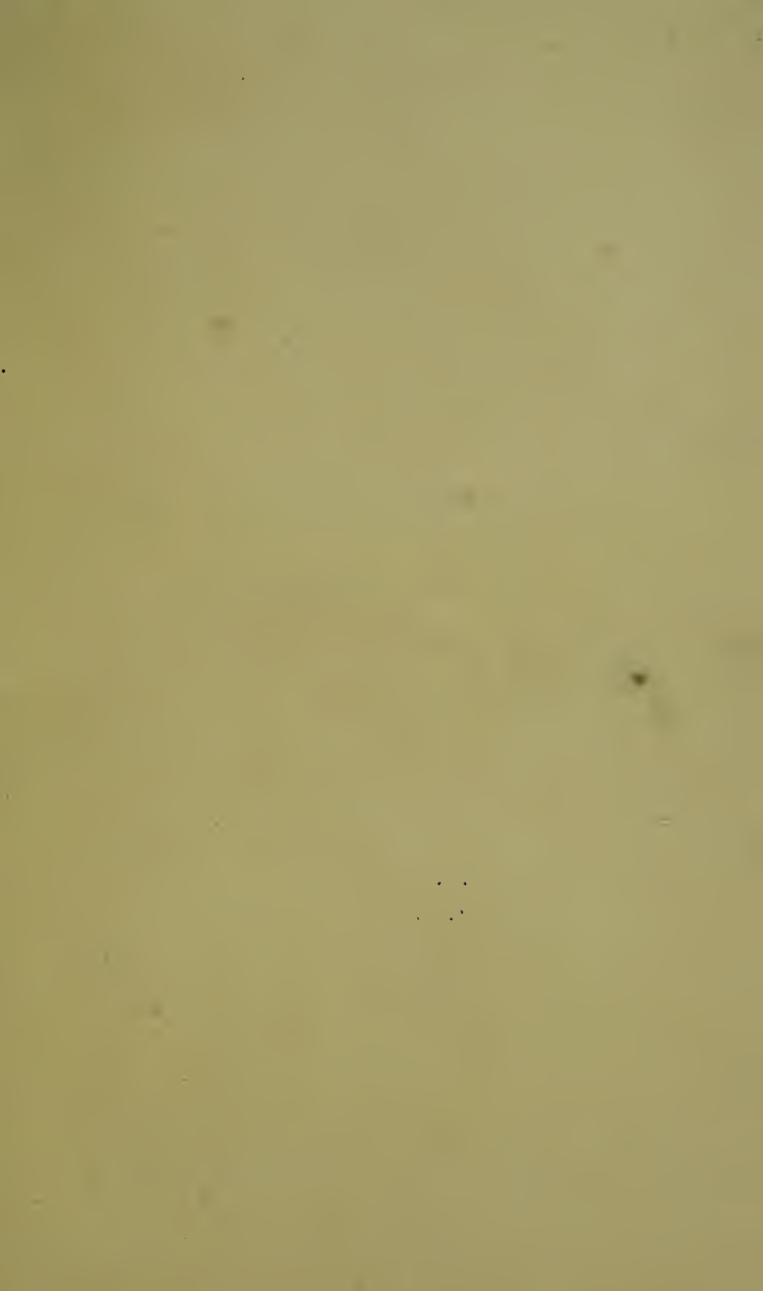






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THE CONFESSIONS OF A  
CURRENCY GIRL



# THE CONFESSIONS OF A CURRENCY GIRL

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# THE CONFESSIONS OF A CURRENCY GIRL.

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## CHAPTER I.

I MUST confess to a feeling of extreme nervousness as I entered the breakfast room next morning, for my heart, though brimful of gladness, yet seemed but half conscious of the great difference between this day and yesterday ; uncertain whether it hovered in the clear atmosphere of a serene sky, or hung trembling on the silver lining of some mysterious cloud. The night had passed in whirling dream-land, and now the day was come.

The greetings of the day were exchanged in the usual form, and anxious inquiries made respecting the condition of my foot,

## 2 *The Confessions of a Currency Girl.*

which I was pleased to say was much better. Indeed I no longer entertained any serious thoughts concerning it, being convinced that two or three days' quietness would be sufficient to set me up again. But in the meantime the conversation wandered away in the usual petty channel, though I could not help thinking that the everlasting smile on Maud's lips concerned me in some way, and that the curious looks with which she favoured me were meant to search out my secret. He, on the other hand, with the exception of an unusual tenderness in the tone of his voice whenever he addressed me, chattered away, as though no dear words had passed between us, of the picnic of the previous day, our mad race, and a dozen other incidents of merely personal interest. Yet when Maud left us to go and attend to her birds, for she had a canary and a magpie of which she was extremely fond, he came to me where I was sitting, put his arms round my neck and kissed me.

“Darling,” he whispered, and the mere sound of his voice made me quiver, “you have made me the happiest of men.” And nestling to him I told him how glad I was; how happy he had made me, and I’m afraid I laid bare the secrets of my foolish heart.

“You love me, then,” he said, “the morning has brought no change?”

And I answered in the fulness of my heart, “Rather has it increased the affection.” At which he pressed me still closer to him and vowed that I was as sweet as I was beautiful; and his eyes, meeting mine, set fire to my soul, and I trembled so that I could not speak, but, hiding my face on his breast, sobbed aloud.

Then he led me out to my chair on the verandah, and seating himself beside me, told me much of his life which had hitherto seemed so mysterious, and all with such an air of candour that I believe I loved him more for his misfortunes and the way he had been misunderstood, than for his appreciation of myself.

#### 4 *The Confessions of a Currency Girl.*

"But I have done with it all now," he said. "The world and I have parted company at last. I gave it my allegiance and it has cheated me vilely. It has been doing the same thing ever since it has been a world, only we won't profit by the experience of others, fools that we are. But you, little one, have stepped into my life now, and with you by my side I know that I shall soon be able to snap my fingers in the face of the past. Unless—unless you too change like the rest of the world."

"Never," I said, and I meant it too.

"I believe you," he replied fondly. "You are, you must be different from the rest of them, or I should never love you so much."

All of which sounded extremely sweet in my ears, making them tingle with pleasure. It was all a new and wonderful thing to me, this love, and, moreover, there was something singularly fascinating in the thought that it was he—he who had been the wonder and mystery of



the place—whom I should love, and who in turn should love me so well. At first it seemed incredible that he who had seen so much, had met so many women who must have been more fascinating in every way than I, should lose his heart to me; but our pride increases with the knowledge of our value, and though little to-day we grow big in a night. Not, I hope, that I was vainer than other girls, but the spirit which was in me had grown strong of a sudden. Yesterday I was a child; to-day I am a woman. I felt proud of the sudden growth, too, little thinking that with the dignity of womanhood would come a woman's woes. Why should I? There was no cloud on my horizon, and every breeze that blew came through the trees of Paradise.

Besides it would be a glorious thing if I—if I could reform him. Wean him from what I still believed to be his evil courses, notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary; set him up honoured and respected; give him the position which

## 6 *The Confessions of a Currency Girl.*

was his due. The child of rumour was a mis-begotten imp; the real man was affectionate if erring, contrite if foolish. Had he not said himself that a good woman could lead the most depraved of men into the better way; and did I not feel that he meant I should be his "good woman" and lift him out of the slough of his own soul? And then—and here the mother Eve came in—what a triumph it would prove over all who had ever dared to look down on me and mine. As the mistress of Langton Station I should be able to take my place with the foremost in the land, and no one then would dare whisper in my presence that I was a currency girl. I knew what respect his wealth would command, and I was glad he was so rich, because I knew they would crawl and cringe to me, and beg a look of recognition, and be thankful for a smile.

I am sorely afraid my heart swelled with its own great vainness as I contemplated these pleasant thoughts. Yet who can blame me? Was it not natural that

I, the lowly, should wish to rise? And if I stared too long into the sun and grew blind thereby, seeing nothing but a world of brilliant scarlet, was it not according to the unchangeable laws of nature? And then I loved him too, or if I did not it was that which seemed like love to me, and would till some stronger, sweeter passion grew up. I know I had never been so deliciously happy in all my life. Every hour of the day I congratulated myself on my great good fortune; and stretched out on my easy chair I would look dreamily out through the roses, away up at the blue sky, and wonder if its inhabitants were as happy as I.

And if I was happy, dear old Will was happy too. I could see that, poor old fellow, in spite of my own blindness, and was not a little grieved in consequence; for he was too good a fellow to be trifled with, and I did not believe Maud really cared for him—that is, as such a man should be cared for. There was no real gladness in her voice when she spoke,

## 8 *The Confessions of a Currency Girl.*

no true light in the eyes which looked into his, however fascinating they may have seemed. My own woman's nature had taught me how to understand and appreciate our feminine tricks, and I could see that she was stringing him on, playing with him, teasing him as we have all teased the sterner sex in our day. I could almost laugh when I think of man's vainness, were it not that the thought of Will brings the tears to my eyes. But after all he is a man, and must live and learn as one. He was no blinder than I, and we no worse than the millions who have gone before.

This infatuation of his, however, though it conduced little to the peace of his mind, had one distinct advantage: it sobered him wonderfully. He rarely visited the town of Wallan now, and never by any chance went near the "Shearer's Rest," or paid court to its bewitching goddess. What she made of the change I don't know, but we were all glad enough at home, for mother and I

had begun to wonder if he were going to turn out loose in his ways. She, dear soul, wept often when she heard of his doings in the town, and of his frequent presence in shady company ; for he was the life of her life, the very blood of her heart. I think she too was afraid that he might grow reckless at the thought of his inheritance. Therefore the change was welcomed as an intercession from heaven, and if a mother's love could compensate him for what he had abandoned, he was well repaid. That the thought of the happiness he had caused her had influenced him in his actions, I will not say, but those actions did bring happiness, and therein lay their virtue. Old Will was now a most exemplary youth, and had dropped, with his companions, much of their ungracious style. He dressed better—I think Captain Langton had not a little to do with it, though, of course, he could not be expected to cut such a dash as that gay soldier. Still, he looked a handsome young giant in his new clothes,

grand enough to win the heart of any woman in any land. No wonder Maud Langton liked to have him hanging about her. It was not often a woman had such a slave at her beck and call.

About noon of the day following our picnic to Fern Tree Gully, Master Will rode over from Granite Creek to make inquiries respecting my sprained ankle. The family were in a state of extreme consternation, he said, mother having upbraided him greatly for not having brought me home, as no one but herself knew how to doctor her child. Sweet soul. She could not know how little that child had thought of her, or of aught beside the joy which had crept so sweetly into her own breast.

“So if you don’t want the family over here this afternoon,” said he, “you had better let me drive you home for an hour or so. Nothing will satisfy them but seeing you in the flesh. Mother would have insisted upon me getting out the buggy and driving her over last night had

father's counsels not prevailed. Poor thing, she has magnified the trouble amazingly, and I am quite sure she has horrible visions of broken legs, amputated limbs, and heaven only knows what not."

"That's so like her."

"Bless her, you know what a tender old soul she is. She has been picturing you lying all night on a bed of agony with clumsy servants doing everything the wrong way and causing you indescribable pain. Instead of which, here you are looking saucier and lovelier than ever." And he kissed me as he used to when we were boy and girl together.

"The Langton air, Will," said a voice, and the Captain approached smiling in his good-natured way.

"I shouldn't wonder," replied old Will. "Anyway she doesn't look much like an invalid, does she?"

Captain Langton looked at me and smiled, and my face grew pleasantly hot. There was good cause for my good looks.



“No,” he said, in answer to Will’s query; “though I cannot agree with you that she looks lovelier to-day than yesterday, considering she always looks her best.”

“Really,” I exclaimed, “don’t you think it would spare me no little embarrassment if you were to wait till I am out of hearing?”

“Girls don’t like this sort of thing, you know,” said Will, trying to look comical. “It might make them vain, and that would never do.” At which they both laughed in a patronizing and superior sort of way.

Then Master Will, in answer to a query of the Captain’s, next made known one of the objects of his visit: namely, to drive me home, so that my sorrowing relations might behold their injured one. To this Captain Langton replied that he had a little business to transact in Wallan, and that if I didn’t mind going there first with him, he himself would drive me over to Granite Creek afterwards.



“Capital,” says poor old Will. “I’ll hurry back and tell them you are coming.”

“Don’t forget to tell mother to get out the best china,” I whispered, walking aside with him.”

“No. Is she coming?”

“She?” I echoed.

“Maud.”

“Go and ask her, Will.”

“You’ll bring her along, won’t you?”

“Why should I?”

“Because I want you to.”

“Why should you want me to?”

“Oh, don’t be such an idiot,” he exclaimed angrily, as he swung off. I, however, went in search of her, though much against the grain, and was quite relieved when she said she had a headache, and that she would be unable to accompany us; not that I in any way objected to her presence, but I was beginning to think the less she saw of Will the better it would be for him.

As soon as the phaeton, with Flaskett

in charge, made its appearance at the door, Captain Langton entered the verandah from the house, and after a few inquiries respecting rugs, etc., I was helped into position; then the Captain sprang up after me, while the man Flaskett jumped up behind in some miraculous manner as the horses dashed off.

My vanity must own to a feeling of triumph while sitting by his side, as we dashed through the principal street of Wallan. How everybody rushed to their doors and windows to look at us, and I knew that many an envious glance was flung after us as we passed along. And when we pulled up at the saddler's opposite the "Shearer's Rest," how extremely gratifying it was to see those horrid Lanes, mother, father, the whole brood—with the exception of Polly—come out to stare, with jealous thoughts, at our equipage. Polly, no doubt, would not add to my triumph by showing her curiosity, but I saw the parlour curtains twitching, and guessed who was behind them.

Our next stoppage was at the Wallaces, and while Captain Langton and Mr. Wallace discussed business, Ella came and led me away, and made me relate how I had met with my misfortune, and sundry other incidents connected with our excursion to Fern Tree Gully.

“Are you sure you have told me all?” she asked, as I drew breath after a somewhat ambiguous recital.

“All worth telling,” I answered unconcernedly.

“You have forgotten nothing?”

“What was there to forget—or remember either, for the matter of that? A gallop, a somewhat disastrous journey down the damp gully, and a cold luncheon.”

“Nothing else?”

“How quizzing you are,” was my petulant reply.

“Am I, dear? I suppose I am getting jealous. I’m afraid you won’t care for our little place after the grandeur of Langton.”

"What a foolish idea," I answered, kissing her as if to emphasize the remark, though in reality I could not help thinking that their house did look insignificant after the Station, and that Ella herself seemed to lack something of that distinguished air so evident in Maud, "what a foolish idea to be sure, as though you were not my one and only friend, and as though I did not love you better than anyone else in the world."

"Of course I am very foolish," she answered, apparently relieved by my sudden outburst of affection; "but I think it would break my heart if you were to let another girl step in between us now, even though she were as rich and beautiful as Maud Langton."

"Maud and I are excellent friends, and she can really be very charming when she likes, but our natures are as divergent as the poles. If we were to live together for a thousand years we should never be nearer to each other than we are now."

Ella looked as though this statement caused her infinite satisfaction.

"And how do you like Captain Langton?" she asked. "Is he really such a dreadful person as they say?"

"On the contrary, Ella, he is very charming."

"Then he has shown no signs of that depravity with which we credited him?"

"How can you?" I exclaimed indignantly, putting a strange force in the little query.

"My dear, I am only asking for confirmation of the current gossip."

"Then you ought to know better, Ella."

She looked at me in her quiet, scrutinizing way, and then said slowly, "Is it as bad as that?"

"I don't know what you mean," I answered shortly, though the blood that rushed to my face belied every word I uttered. "Moreover, I am not accustomed to being catechized in this way."

“ This way, dear ? ”

“ Yes,” said I, now thoroughly aroused, angry with myself for getting angry, and angrier still for allowing myself to be driven into a corner, “ this insinuating way. It’s not like you, Ella, not in the least.”

And so, fool-like, with every word I uttered I gave away my secret, and, what is more, I might have lost my dearest friend too, had she not treated me with the utmost consideration. I saw the pained look sweep over her face as I spoke, and when she turned aside I knew it was to hide something more tangible than a look. In a moment the wish to throw myself on her breast and tell her all swept in upon me ; and then the next moment I did not dare, for what had I to tell her ? I seemed to recollect for the first time that nothing but words of love had passed between him and me. Till now they had seemed life, hope, an eternity of delight ; now they were only words. For the moment I trembled, feeling ashamed of my day dreams.

"I had a letter from Arthur this morning," said she, turning to me her sweet face in the old sweet confiding way. "You will be glad to hear that he is getting on splendidly at the University."

"Glad indeed. Is he still as sanguine of passing through without a failure?"

"More so, if anything. He says his mind is open now, and he can take in the science in big doses."

. "He always was a steady-going plodder. I really should not be in the least surprised to hear of him succeeding," I added loftily.

"I think he will succeed," she said quietly.

"I am sure I hope so. I suppose he has not quite forgotten the family yet?"

"He could never forget your family, while you belong to it."

"Has he still got that silly notion? Dear me. I should have thought he would have sunk all remembrance of Wallan in the gaiety of Melbourne."

"It would, perhaps, be better for him

if he could, but I'm afraid he will never forget you, Flossie."

"What nonsense! You will hear of him marrying before he's two years older."

"He will never marry," she answered seriously, "unless he marries you."

"He is only a boy, Ella. He will forget all about me for the first pretty face he sees." And, indeed, I hoped it might be so, for I liked and respected Arthur too well to cause him a moment's unhappiness.

Just as she was about to reply Mr. Wallace hurriedly entered the room.

"Come, my dear, hurry up," he cried, "the Captain is waiting. How's your foot, child? Awfully sorry to hear of the accident. Hope it's nothing serious?"

"Nothing," I answered laughingly, for I could see that though he strained at his usual politeness he could not get away from the great idea that Captain Langton



was waiting—the man of broad acres and vast treasures was waiting; and though Mr. Wallace was an excellent man in all respects, he had a very natural affection for a heavy purse. This may account somewhat for his evident anxiety.

“Come, come, Flossie,” he went on excitedly as I stayed to kiss and say good-bye to Ella. “Do you know that you have kept Captain Langton waiting quite five minutes?”

“Have I really?” I answered, looking very shocked, and as I made my way towards the door, I felt myself wondering what sort of order the Captain had given the worthy man.

But at length we got away, and once more the little town turned out to admire our equipage as we dashed through. My companion, far from being annoyed at having to wait those five minutes which seemed such an eternity to Mr. Wallace, was in excellent spirits. Indeed, I never knew him to be in what he called better form, and he made me laugh con-

## 22 *The Confessions of a Currency Girl.*

sumedly as he imitated the pomposity of Mr. Wallace. It was evident Captain Langton did not understand that worthy man, and I never thought it worth while to enlighten him. This is not infrequently the way with one's friends.

At last the old house loomed in sight, and I must own to feeling just a little bit ashamed of it. The shame was mine, truly, and I felt deeply my own ingratitude and error, but it did look so very insignificant after Langton Station. Why, here was I thinking we were gentlefolk, and dreaming of a certain baronetcy away in England, and all the while we were only farmers. Little time, however, was given for reflection. The horses dashed through the gateway, and a few moments after I was in the bosom of my family ; and truly delightful it was to feel their warm welcome, and see the smile of joy on each dear face.

“The foot, the foot,” they all cried, “how is the foot?”

But I had scarcely time to answer, "It is well," before mother seized and led me off to her room, insisting upon making a searching examination of the affected member.

## CHAPTER II.

AND so my visit was at last drawing to a close. After five weeks of novelty and happiness, weeks which were undoubtedly the most enjoyable I had ever spent, I was about to return to the old hum-drum life at Granite Creek, and, if the truth must be confessed, I did not look forward to the change with any degree of pleasure. Not that I liked my dear ones less, but because I had lived another life. I tried hard to wish that I had never accepted the Langtons' hospitality, but I found the effort a vain one, for my soul loved the "lordly pleasure house," and I had drunk deeply of the intoxicating draught of riches. The Langtons were returning to town; the Captain would most probably go to Europe for the

summer, and I—what would become of me? I dreaded to think, for the thought always made me utterly wretched, and so I tried to banish it and revel in the few sunbeams which were left me. He was still the same thoughtful lover, tender ever, smiling always; and yet I used to think there was a restraint about him at times not altogether satisfactory. Still this only appeared at odd moments. Like a cloud it passed across his face; but the sunshine was all the brighter after, and whatever happened he was always deferential and polite to a degree. Extravagant, truly, he was in praise of my beauty, which he declared surpassed that of any woman he had ever seen; but that, instead of being regarded with suspicion, was what might naturally be expected to fill a girl's heart with gladness. But with this exception I was astonished at his excessive modesty, considering the remarkable reputation he bore. Of course I had long since entirely disbelieved in that reputation. I knew that no man,

who was as black as the world had painted him, could possibly have hidden his wickedness so long from my searching eyes; and when he spoke of his projected trip to England, and suggested, in many ways, that I should accompany him, I knew it was modesty alone which prevented him from asking me outright to be his wife. I could see it in his eyes. Besides, had he not hinted at it a hundred times in a hundred different ways?—only I was a woman and could not let him see that I understood aught but the plain words, “Will you marry me?”

It was the day previous to my leaving for home, and as I walked slowly up and down the great verandah, dreaming the last few weeks over and over again, and wondering if I should go back to Granite Creek the happiest or the most miserable girl in Australia, I beheld Will come trotting up the well-gravelled drive. He sat his horse rather loosely, I thought, an uncommon thing for him, and one which I could not help noticing.

"Why, Will," said I, as he dismounted and handed his horse to Flaskett, who, hearing the beat of hoofs, was immediately in attendance, "what on earth is the matter with you?"

"Nothing," he replied almost surlily, "I'm all right."

"No, you're not, dear," I said, taking him by the hand and leading him to my seat in the far corner of the verandah. "You're far from being all right, and I want to know what ails you."

"Nothing, I tell you," he repeated doggedly. "Surely a fellow ought to know whether he's right or not?"

"And so he does, Will."

"Then what are you talking about?"

"But you know well enough, and so do I, that if you have no bodily ailment, you have something very serious on your mind."

"How do you know that?" he asked with a nervous smile.

"Anyone who looks at you must know it. Your face is positively haggard, you

are not a bit like yourself—you—you look frightened."

"A cur, eh?"

"No, dear."

"I feel like one anyway."

"You could never look it, dear."

"Upon my word," he said, "I think you grow nicer every hour of your life. I don't believe any other fellow ever had such a sister."

"I am sure no sister ever had such a brother," I answered, and I meant it too.

He laughed and kissed me, but I am not so certain that it was laughter which dimmed his honest eyes.

"Dear little Flos," he said; and then he turned away his face and pretended to study intently the distant plains.

"What brought you over this morning?" I ventured at last.

He started suddenly as though awakened from a reverie, surveyed me somewhat nervously, but answered not.

"Was it to see me?"

"Yes—partly."



"No one else?"

"You are laughing at me."

"Indeed I am not."

Looking at me earnestly, and seeming convinced that I was not, he answered in a low voice, "Yes, I did come to see someone else. Have you guessed my secret?"

Guessed his secret. Poor, simple old fellow.

"Secret, my dear Will," I replied. "Why it's been as plain as daylight ever since you saw her."

"Is that a fact?" Poor old Will seemed not a little astonished at this statement of mine, for he opened his big eyes in a most amusing manner, interrogating me with a stare.

"Of course it is. No one could help seeing it."

"Do you think she knows?"

"She is no woman if she does not."

"Well, it's nothing to be ashamed of, is it?" says he, owning up in his blunt, manly fashion. "I can't help it, I some-

times wish I could. But she is very beautiful, Flos, and I love her greatly, madly I might almost say, for when I get alone and think, and think, I feel half-mad at times."

"Have you told her how you love her?"

"No—not in words; but, as you say, she must have seen it."

"Yes, yes, but women like to hear the words, Will, words which they cannot possibly misunderstand." I was thinking of myself at the time, and so spoke somewhat earnestly in consequence.

"I dare say you are right," he replied, "but to tell you the truth I have been afraid to speak to her."

"Afraid, Will?"

"Yes. That's why you see me looking such a cur."

"But who is she that you should be afraid?"

"If she were a queen or a beggar maid it would be the same," he said. "So much depends on her answer that I have been afraid to risk it."

"Then you will never know."

"I shall know to-day," he said. "What do you think of my chance?"

I could not tell him what I really thought of it, so I replied, "She will never have a better man at her feet, Will, if she lives till she's a thousand."

"She's not likely to have many at that age," says the poor old fellow with a sickly smile.

"Oh," I said, "women have to be pretty old, you know, before they abandon hope."

"Has she—has Maud ever spoken of me?" he asked at length, though not without considerable embarrassment.

"She admires you greatly as a man, but whether she ever thinks of you as a lover or not, I don't know. If your attachment is as serious as you say, why have you not tested her long ago? You might have lost, Will, but at any rate you would have been spared this uncertainty."

"I have been on the point of speaking a dozen times," he confessed, "but the

dreadful fear that she did not care for me has held me back. Yet she has been very nice to me at times." (What gracious condescension, I thought.) "And often I could have sworn she cared for me; and once," here his voice dropped and he looked uncommonly serious, "I believe I would have got it out if she hadn't looked at me with that surprised, half-amused look of hers which is more withering than the anger of any other woman."

I knew it well, nor did her behaviour surprise me. It was what I had believed and feared all along. She was flattered at having this grand specimen of young manhood in her train, and there all interest in him ceased.

"Will," I said, for I meant to prepare him for the worst, "it is quite right that you should have this interview with her, and learn from her own lips what her feelings are towards you; but you must bear in mind that she came to us almost a stranger, that she has given you no real encouragement, and that she may

possibly have formed an attachment with someone in Melbourne of whom we are entirely ignorant. Therefore it is as well, dear, for you not to build too highly on your hopes."

"You have heard something?" he asked suspiciously.

"Not a sound. Only I would have you remember that though you loved her ten times more dearly than you do, that would not necessarily make her love you."

"No," he said, "of course not—I'm a fool. Anyway, Flos, I mean to put an end to this uncertainty. Where is she?"

"In the drawing-room, I think. She was reading when I came out."

"I will go to her. I must know what it is to be one way or the other."

So into the house he went boldly enough, though I knew that he, poor fellow, was in a whirl of excitement. I know I was, for I guessed what the result would be and dreaded it accordingly. I stood by the front door for a moment till

34 *The Confessions of a Currency Girl.*

I heard her words of greeting, and then, fearing to face him after the interview, I seized my hat and hurried off down the garden. Here I took up my position in a little rose-grown summer-house, which stood back some twelve or fifteen paces from the drive, for from here I should be able to catch the expression of his face and so see how went the day. Poor old Will. Five minutes after he had left me I heard the sound of rapid steps coming along the gravel, and on looking through the foliage discovered him advancing hastily, head down, and evidently much agitated. My first impulse was to rush out and call him, for I saw too well what the result of the interview had been; but as he came opposite the little summer-house he lifted his face for a moment and I saw such a fearful look of pain, horror and hate thereon, that I shrank back frightened, and his name died soundless on my lips. Away he passed in the direction of the stables, and a few minutes after I heard the tramp of

his horse's hoofs as he set out on his desolate journey homeward.

For a long time, how long I cannot tell, I sat in the little arbour wondering what had passed between them, though the gist of it I could, unfortunately, guess too well. Yet this could have been no mere rejection of his suit, else why that awful look of anger?—a look I had not seen on his face since the day Patsy Dillon called him a convict. Could she have used that dreadful word, that one word in all the great English language which drove the manhood from his heart, and brought him quivering to his knees?

At length, after a long consultation with my own thoughts, I quitted my retreat and wended my way indoors; but as I approached the drawing-room I heard brother and sister laugh merrily over some pleasant jest. She was evidently sitting at the piano, for every now and again came the soft ripple of a note or two struck at random. And yet

36 *The Confessions of a Currency Girl.*

I distinctly heard him say, "What infernal impudence," and she, laughing oddly, answered, "So I thought," and with that she dashed off into one of her favourite compositions.

I had little doubt that it was Will of whom they spoke, and not caring to enter at such a moment, for I should have been unable to control the anger which was smouldering within me, I passed hastily to my room, and in a none too pleasant frame of mind whiled away the time till dinner.

At table, however, my host and hostess were perfectly charming, and had I not known much, and guessed more, I would not have thought it possible that either could think ill of any member of my family. Indeed, I am not certain that by degrees I did not entertain a more charitable feeling towards them both, for the way they dwelt on my approaching departure, and the nice things they said touching the loss they would both sustain, set me wondering if



I had not judged them with unwarrantable severity.

“ So it’s to be to-morrow, little one ? ” said Captain Langton that evening as he led me out to the well-known corner of the verandah. “ And when and how am I to see you again ? ”

“ You may come to Granite Creek, you know.”

“ Yes ; but I cannot live at Granite Creek, and to live anywhere without you is impossible.” As I remained silent, wondering how I too should be able to live the old life over again, he continued, “ Have you no terror at the thought of this parting ? Is it nothing to you ? Are you content to go and leave me like this ? ”

“ What can I do ? It is no pleasure for me to go back to the old dull life. I sometimes wish that I had never come here.”

“ Then why should you go back to the old life, my darling ? ” And he pressed me closer to him, kissing me passionately ;

38 *The Confessions of a Currency Girl.*

and I abandoned myself to the sweet dream and thought that I was happy.

“Why?” I echoed, and wondered what was coming next.

“Yes, why, since you love me, since I love you? Why should we not be all in all to each other? I shall wish for no happier lot than that of being always near you. Florence, darling,” and here his voice became intensely passionate, “I love you better than my life, and if you will trust your dear self to me, I swear to you that I will live only for the sake of making you happy.”

What answer could I make to such a sweet outpouring of the heart? I hid my face on his breast and told him that I loved him; and he kissed me as though he knew it not already; and the stars came out and danced merrily across the dark blue bosom of the night; and the moon sailed on above the tree-tops, flooding the world with streams of white fire, and every breeze that stirred the rose leaves in their sleep bore the sweet

intoxicant of their breath into my throbbing brain.

What visions I dreamt, what castles built. The new great world, which I had yearned so long to see, was to be opened to me at last, and I was to partake of its wonders. We were to go direct to Melbourne; from thence take ship to Egypt, visit Alexandria, Cairo, and the great Pyramids; then cross the Mediterranean to Brindisi or Naples and enjoy an extended tour all through Europe. Was prospect ever so entrancing? I, a mere bush girl, who had spent the best part of my life in envious dreamings, I was to see, to do all this. No wonder my brain reeled so that I scarcely comprehended what he said beyond that he loved me, and that he and I were going to live only for each other.

"It will be a glorious trip," I said, "and one which I have longed to undertake ever since I was big enough to know that there was another, a stranger world beyond the sea."

“You have dreamt of it, then?”

“Ah, haven’t I! It seems scarcely credible that my dreams are about to be realized.”

“It is credible enough,” he answered, “though I must confess I feel as though it were incredible that to me should fall the happiness of making you so happy. Ah, my darling, your dreams shall be nothing to the reality. Let us love each other always, always.” And again and again he pressed his lips to mine, as though from my lips he drew his breath of life. And I, forgetting all but the ring of his passionate accents, forgetting poor old Will and all the dear ones at home, closed my eyes and wondered what I had ever done to merit such happiness.

And when he knew that I had drunk deeply of the dream-cup, and that I was already lost in the confused whirl of things, he said, “There is only one request I have to make, my darling. This engagement must be kept secret for a little while longer yet.”

“But I may tell mother now?”

“No, not yet—not till it is all over.”

“All over,” I echoed.

“Don’t you understand that it would be scarcely paying due respect to my father’s memory for me to announce anything of the sort at present. I go to Melbourne in a week. You must secretly join me there.”

This proposal somewhat startled me.

“I will come to you,” I replied, “but not secretly. Why should we not wait and be married here surrounded by our own people?”

“Do you not love me well enough to trust me?”

“Of course I love you—but—but—.” I felt myself grow giddy, suddenly realizing that I stood on the brink of a fearful precipice.

“But you do not trust me? And yet I would lay down my life for you.”

“Perhaps I am very ignorant,” I said, feeling sorrow for the pain I was causing

him. "You know I am only a bush girl, so if I appear rude you must pardon me; but I could not do as you wish—indeed, I could not marry any man without the consent of my parents."

He laughed coldly, a disdainful laugh, too, the sudden anger darting from his eyes. "My dear girl," he said, "I think you must be under some misapprehension. Why should you imagine marriage to be a necessity?"

I could scarcely believe my ears at first, but like some loathsome torrent his true meaning rushed in upon me. Trembling with shame and confusion, I rose to my feet.

"Do you mean to insult me, Captain Langton?"

"No, no; a thousand times no," he added hastily. "You misunderstand me entirely. There are reasons which prevent me from offering you my name."

"There can only be one reason. You are married?"

He bowed his head without speaking.

"Oh, it was cruel of you," I gasped. "Why, why did you not tell me this before?"

"Because from the first moment I set eyes on you I loved you," and he again attempted to take me in his arms, but I repulsed him hotly, "and because I knew that you would show no mercy once you knew all. But the world is before us, darling. Why should we not live only for one another?"

"Captain Langton," I said, and I was glad the night hid my tell-tale face, "we have evidently been much mistaken in each other. I beg that you will never mention this subject again." I turned to go, but he seized me by the wrist.

"Don't be a little fool," he said crossly. "If my impatience has led me into error, why not forgive me frankly, since I ask for pardon?"

"I will forgive you, then, but let me go."

But instead of so doing, he drew me to him in spite of my resistance, and I dared not cry lest I should alarm the house. And into my ears he poured streams of passionate utterances, which, had they flown only from a pure source, would have delighted instead of terrifying me. But the same dreadful meaning was there, and every sacred sentiment he expressed was rendered hideously unholy by my knowledge of his other meaning. I was beside myself with grief and shame, and could only sob, "Let me go, let me go. How dare you insult me?"

He threw my hand aside with an exclamation of contempt. "Insult you, what damned nonsense! How could I have meant anything else to you?"

A cold, cruel feeling of isolation swept over me. All my anger, all my disgust gave place to a dull, sickening pain at the heart. For the first time I saw myself as he had seen me, and I grew faint at the sight. I tried to speak, and am con-



scious of mumbling something—what I cannot say—and then, half blinded by a sudden rush of tears, I turned and left him.

### CHAPTER III.

To say I slept badly that night would be extremely misleading, for it might convey the idea that sleep had visited me in some form or other, whereas I doubt if I slept at all. Hour after hour I tossed from side to side, my brain burning and throbbing as though every drop of blood in my body had flown to my head. So this was the end of my dreams; this was the pure love I had kindled in that reprobate breast; this was the man whom I in my ignorance was going to reform. And all the time he was laughing at me, playing with me for his own ends, and each sweet sentiment, could I have seen into it, was but the perfumed vehicle which conveyed the vile idea. To him, no doubt, I appeared but as a

vain, ignorant girl longing for the fruit beyond her reach ; the convict's daughter in whom the taint as yet had found no outlet. And I had dreamt of being the wife of this man, and of taking my place by his side amid the best in the land. In his looks I had seen nothing but respectful love ; his words had fallen on my heart like drops of honey.

It was with intense relief I beheld the morning break, and as soon as the light was strong enough for me to see, I arose, weary and worn out, and set to work to pack my things, thankful that a few short hours now would see me clear of the hateful house. Over and over again I congratulated myself upon the scene occurring so opportunely, so to speak, for had it happened at any other time, how should I have accounted for the curtailment of my visit ?—for to stay on at Langton after what had happened would have been absolutely impossible. Now no one need know how cruelly I had been insulted. The dear

ones would welcome me with joy. I should go back to the old life, the happy life, too, if I could only know it.

Thanks to that innate stubbornness of mine—which had so often been designated by a less complimentary name—which would not permit me to show fear though every nerve in my body were quaking, I was able to present myself, as usual, at the breakfast-table next morning, bowing to my host and hostess as of old. It was a great ordeal, to be sure, but trust a woman for going through with her part once she has determined upon it. Every time I looked up I caught his eyes fixed hard upon me, but I do not think he gained much satisfaction from the impenetrable look upon my face. The conversation turned chiefly on the breaking up of our little party, at which Maud seemed quite concerned, but whether she really was or not I cannot say, though after what had passed between her and Will I should have thought she would be glad to see the back of the last Hastings.

Very slowly, it seemed to me, the meal was got through, but when it was finished we adjourned to the verandah, as usual, and yet with what a difference ! Captain Langton lit his after-breakfast cigar and flung himself into one of the big easy chairs, apparently contented with himself and the world in general, while Maud and I stood on the steps looking out across the familiar plains.

“ I shall miss you dreadfully, Flossie,” she was saying, “ but you, I suppose, will be glad to get back to your family ? ”

“ I am always glad to be with my family,” I answered. “ Yet I can also appreciate Langton.”

“ Well, it’s not such a bad old place, I suppose. They tell me it’s one of the finest in the district, though I should detest a fairy palace if it were in the country.”

“ Then I suppose it will be a long time before we see you here again ? ”

“ Most probably. I go to town on Saturday, and I do not think you will see

me here for many a Saturday to come. What I am to do till then Heaven only knows."

"It is only three clear days."

"Yes, but three days by oneself is an eternity. I know I am very selfish, dear, but I do wish you could stay till I go."

I began to excuse myself, mentioning the fact that they were expecting me at home—a clumsy refusal which did not escape her.

"Ah, well," she said, with a strange laugh, "I daresay you are tired of this dull old place. I don't wonder at it. I envy you, though, your journey. I only wish I was going home." And with something very like a sigh she turned from me and entered the house. I, too, immediately turned with the intention of following her, when Captain Langton, who all this time had been quietly pulling at his cigar, sprang hastily to his feet.

"One moment, Flossie." A couple of quick strides and he was beside me.

"Well?" I asked somewhat defiantly,

though I have a vivid recollection of trembling in every limb.

"I want you to forgive me for what passed between us last night."

"I had forgotten it."

"I would not have you forget it," he said in a low voice, "for to forget it were to forget me. I love you, dearest, love you, love you. I swear to you that you misunderstood me last night."

"There was no misunderstanding you, Captain Langton. Your words were as unmanly as they were insulting."

"If to say I loved you were an insult, then surely I have insulted you, and beg your pardon. Last night, I confess, I was not myself. The wine may have loosened my foolish tongue ; but now in sober daylight I tell you that I love you, and that I shall be the proudest man in Australia if you will only marry me."

I looked at him in wonder, not certain that he was sober even now. Yet he appeared sane enough and quite sincere.

"Captain Langton," I said, "this may

seem an excellent jest to you, but it is one that would cost you dear if it were known."

"I do not understand your threats," he answered, in an aggrieved tone.

"Nor I your wit."

"What a Tartar it is," he exclaimed, laughingly, "and yet what an angel too. I declare, my sweet, that I would prefer to see you in a perpetual passion were your fury not directed against me. Come, speak the word," and he took my hand in spite of my displeasure. "Will you marry me?"

This persistence angered me, for I had not forgotten his tacit admission of last night—the reason why he could not offer me his name.

"I would not marry you under any consideration, even if you were free."

"That was a joke," he said.

"Then you are a liar as well as a profligate!" It was out, rude and hot with passion, and I wrenched my hand free of his grasp. The blood rushed in a



torrent to his fair face, and for the moment a most evil light shone in his eyes. Several times his lips moved as though he were going to speak, but with a prodigious effort he repressed the anger which rose to them.

“Why not give in tamely?” he said presently with an odd laugh. “You know very well you can’t escape me. Sooner or later it must be. Why put off the inevitable?”

I too laughed, my spirit being up in arms.

“You flatter yourself, Captain Langton.”

“Not at all, Miss Hastings. I know.”

There was something so masterful in his tone, in the half-amused, half-fierce smile on his face, that I could not resist the question, “You know?”

“Yes, I know; because in your heart of hearts you love me.”

He little knew how near he was to the truth, and how a little judicious management might have turned the scales in his

favour. Yet my woman's nature would not admit the weakness even to myself.

"You are at perfect liberty to think what you please," I said. "It concerns me nothing."

"It concerns you much, and it shall concern you more."

"We shall see."

"Do you think I am going to give you up like this?" he cried with sudden anger. "Do you think you are going to make a fool of me to tickle your own vanity? No, by G—d you don't! I'll kill you first."

"Your threats are in keeping with your character," said I coldly, turning to go.

"I did not mean to threaten you," he said, "but you madden me. I beg your pardon. Will you forgive me?"

"On the condition that you never broach this subject again."

"I accept the condition. Let us at least part friends." And he held out his hand, which I pretended not to see.

“Won’t you even shake hands with me?”

There was no ignoring this direct appeal, so I held out my hand, which he, seizing, drew quickly to him, and ere I was aware of it he had both his arms about me.

“There,” he ejaculated laughingly, looking triumphantly into my face, “I told you just now you were mine. What is the use of struggling, dearest?”

His look of triumph, his consummate coolness, roused my none too gentle nature. There was a masterful, consequential air about him to which my spirit would not tamely submit. He may have thought he was honouring the currency girl by his protestations of affection, but to her there seemed no honour in it—rather the reverse. The words which under one condition thrill with joy the poor heart, which sound as sweet to the ear as the ripple of water in the desert, under another suggest nothing but the most terrifying thoughts. I could no

longer place credence in the soft words which fell so glibly from his lips, lips which I am sure had framed the same phrases for many a silly girl. Moreover, knowing him better, I feared him now for the first time. The glamour and the romance no longer burnt, halo-like, about his head. He was what they had said, and had I been less firm by nature it might have gone ill with me. Yet that he should deliberately have set himself the task of ensnaring me was what I could neither overlook nor forgive. That all his solemn oaths, his passionate protestations, had but the one dishonourable aim and object, seemed to me the incarnation of profligacy. And so I wrenched myself free of his embrace, and without a look or word fled into the house.

An hour later they came to tell me that the trap was at the door, and, fearing that Captain Langton would think it necessary that he should accompany me on my homeward journey, I adjusted my hat and dust-coat with many a nervous

tremor, though I stalked from my room with the air of one determined to go through with even that unpleasant experience. On the verandah, as if waiting my appearance, were Maud and her brother, he, apparently, having no intention of driving me back, for which I was devoutly thankful, though at the same time a little disappointed.

“Good-bye, dear,” said Maud, kissing me on both cheeks with every token of affection. “I hope you have not altogether regretted coming to us, though we have been unconscionably dull.”

“I have enjoyed my visit exceedingly,” I said; “and as for dulness,” I added with a smile, “I consider we have been positively gay.”

“Heaven forbid,” she replied with a little shudder.

“Ideas of pleasure vary,” said her brother. “Miss Hastings means that she found the place more entertaining than she expected.”

“Oh, well,” said Maud, “you must

visit us again under more auspicious conditions, dear. We shall try and make up to you then for all that you have missed now."

Once more I declared my indebtedness to them for what they had done, then Maud and I kissed again, and Captain Langton escorted me down the steps to the trap, in which sat, sphinx-like as ever, the redoubtable Flaskett.

"I thought you would not care for me to drive you," said the Captain in a low voice. I almost imperceptibly inclined my head. "But I shall see you soon," he added as he helped me to mount the buggy. "You must not think that I am going to part with you like this."

Luckily I had no opportunity of replying. I know I felt the angry blood sweep over my face, but I pretended to ignore the remark by devoting all my attention to the arrangement of my wraps and the voluminous folds of my dust-coat.

"Are you sure you have everything?" shouted Maud.

“ Quite, thank you.”

“ Then off you go, Flaskett, and be very careful.”

Flaskett raised his whip towards his hat, indulged in that strange “ clucking ” sound with which horses, strangely enough, are urged onward, and away we went. Maud waved her hand to me, the Captain saluted as became a military man ; then a bend in the road hid them and the house from sight.

It was with a sigh of relief, and yet with an unconscious sigh of weariness too, that I turned my back on Langton Station, for, after all, I had experienced there some of the sweetest hours of my life. True the honey had been turned to gall, but we had cared for each other—nay, did we not care for each other still?—and I could not forget, though I called in pride and dignity to my aid. Sitting well back on the cushions, I gave myself up to thought : through each incident of note, since my coming to Langton, I went with a distressing minuteness, nor till I caught

sight of the roof and chimneys of the old place at Granite Creek, did I awake to the fact that I was not in my easy chair on the broad verandah of the Station.

I sat up with a sudden start. The man Flaskett stole a glance at me from out the corners of his little eyes.

“I suppose you go to town with Captain and Miss Langton?” I asked, more by way of making conversation than anything else, for I knew perfectly well that he was going.

“Yes, miss.”

“You will not be sorry either?” I suggested; for whereas my first impression of Mr. Flaskett had been one of mistrust and suspicion, a better acquaintance with that worthy had shown me that first impressions are not always to be relied upon. Indeed he had been particularly civil and attentive to me during my stay at the Station, mainly owing, I think, to my having shown him a little ordinary consideration. His ugly face repelled me at first, next it amused me, there being some-



thing singularly mirth-provoking in the little man's grim dolefulness.

Mr. Flaskett smiled rather knowingly as he replied to my query, "No, miss, I can't say that I will. Melbourne's good enough for me."

"Then you prefer it to the country?"

"Rather," was the laconic reply. "It's my native city, miss. I was born in Collin'wood."

"Were you indeed?"

"I were. And a nice place it is too," added Mr. Flaskett with an impressive shake of the head. "A bit rowdy down Smith Street of a Saturday night, to be sure, but quite 'armless for all that. I only wish I'd never left it to become *this*. Ah, miss, I can't tell you how I hate it." It will be observed that Mr. Flaskett was not entirely devoid of aspirates, though he not infrequently ignored their existence.

"Hate what?"

"Being what I am—a flunkey."

"Oh," said I, vainly striving to sup-

press a smile ; " there must be flunkies, as you call them."

" I suppose so," said Mr. Flaskett gloomily. " Yet from art to 'orses is a bit of a drop, ain't it, miss ? "

" Art ! I had no idea you were an artist."

" I am, though ; or was," he added, correcting himself. " There wasn't a man in the house could carry a better banner, though perhaps I oughtn't to say so."

" What house ? "

" Beg pardon, miss, the theatre. I was an actor." And as he uttered these impressive words Mr. Flaskett straightened himself as though in imagination he were making a grand entrance at the head of the supernumerary corps.

" So you were an actor. How delightful ! "

" Well, it was something, miss," he said, a dreamy, far-away look on his face.

" Yet if you dislike your present posi-

tion so much, what made you enter Captain Langton's service?"

"I hardly know, miss, but I think it was disgust with the profession—they gave little Smith the biggest banner at our last revival of Richard III.—and my natural love of 'orseflesh combined. You see, father used to drive a cab, and so I suppose I inherited my love of animals through him. I think things runs in families like that. I know my Uncle Bill once got into trouble over some 'orses."

"For long?"

"Three year, I think; but poor Uncle Bill was never lucky. Not that they found anything against him, miss, though it was the third time they had him up. But his luck was always dead out. Father used to say that it was a fair put-up job of the police, and that Uncle Bill was as honest a man as ever walked."

"Then he must have been one of the most unfortunate of men."

"He was, no doubt. Well, miss, to

leave the stable for the stage was right enough, but to leave the stage for the stable was the foolishhest thing I ever done; though, perhaps, natural enough, considering the things that was in me, and the wages the Captain offered. But, miss, I didn't think I was selling my birthright, I didn't upon my word."

"Have you been long with Captain Langton?"

He stole a strange look at me from out the corners of his little eyes. "Ten months, miss." And here he whipped up the horses as though he intended saying no more on the subject, and I, of course, had not the temerity to question him, though I should have welcomed any information concerning a certain person, no matter whence its source.

At last we reached the end of our journey, and all the dear ones came out to welcome me home again, and as I was clasped in the arms of one after the other, and kissed fondly all the while, I felt how fortunate I was in being surrounded by

such devotion. Father, I thought, looked graver than usual, and Harold—poor Harold!—if anything paler and more attenuated, but their greeting was nevertheless of the warmest nature, and I knew they were overjoyed to have me back.

“With you away it has not seemed like the same house,” said Harold, as he and I sat out on the verandah after tea. “I am sure mother has been at sea during the whole of your absence, waking up only when you ran over to see us, while even I have been mooning about like one who is for ever expecting a surprise. Dear old Sis, how we should miss you if you went away altogether.”

“I shall never go away,” I said.

“Don’t tell me that,” he laughed. “You are too beautiful to be left in peace.”

“Perhaps not quite so beautiful as you think, Harold. Remember you are my brother.”

“And don’t you think a brother has

eyes? To tell you the truth, Sis, I was dreadfully afraid that you would fall in love with Captain Langton."

"Well, you see," I answered with a forced laugh, "I have returned heart whole and fancy free. But suppose I had fallen in love with him?"

"Don't suppose anything so dreadful," he replied. Then looking sharply at me he asked, "There is nothing between you, Sis?"

"Of course not. How could Captain Langton condescend to look at me?"

Harold shook his little head sagaciously. "You know you don't mean that. But there's poor Will mooning about the garden. Dear old chap, he seems to have made an awful mess of it. Go down to him, Sis, and see if you can't pour a little balm into his wounds."

So, glad to escape the prying eyes and pointed questions of the younger brother, I seized my hat and hurried off to sympathize, if need be, with the elder.

He saw me coming, and, guessing my

intentions, turned his back on me and walked smartly off in the opposite direction. But, hurrying forward, I laid my hand on his arm and made him stop and face me.

“Will,” I said, “I want to know all about it.”

“About what?” he asked sullenly.

“About her.”

He laughed harshly, a hard, cynical look overspreading his handsome face, which, alas, even in one day, had grown to look years older. “It’s off—that’s all. I wasn’t good enough for her.”

“Not good enough?”

“No, not good enough. When I told her all, showed my heart like the fool that I was, she looked at me with her grand air of surprise, and forbade me to speak of it further; and when, for I couldn’t hold my tongue, I upbraided her for her indifference, coldness, coquetry, she turned on me like a devil and wanted to know how I dared presume to talk to her—I, the son of a convict.”

“She did not say that, Will? She could not have been so cruel.”

“Perhaps not in those words, but she hinted at it plainly enough. Well, she was quite right; and I’ll tell you what it is, Flos, we’re only tolerated amongst these people out of a mistaken sense of generosity. This convict taint will prove too much for us yet, see if it doesn’t.”

I, too, was afraid he spoke truly, but I answered as in duty bound, “Nonsense. How can it affect us, or make you or me different from what we are? There is no criminal blood in our veins: you and I, Will, have as great a sense of right and wrong as any of our neighbours. Morally we are not perverted, and though we suffer as being the members of a class, no one who knows us can say that we have not our full share of human virtues.”

“With more than our share of vice. It is no good attempting to gloss the dreadful truth. The old man was sent to Botany Bay, and though we were all angels that one fact would drag us down.



We might be forgiven any crime but that. No," he added despondently, "if you want my honest opinion of the case, it's this : The best thing this family can do is to pack itself away, change its name, and make for one of the other colonies."

"I am sure you exaggerate the trouble, Will. There are thousands of people here who would not think the less of you because father was a currency man, if you yourself were honest. I grant you we have had a bad start, dear old fellow," and here I took his great hand and began to stroke it softly, "but remember we have only begun the race, and if we keep up our heart and run fairly, I think we shall not be the last in at the finish."

"You're a good little girl, Flos," he said, squeezing my hand tenderly, "and worth a dozen of me when it comes to a push. But you must understand that I was madly infatuated, and that my infatuation caused me to think myself a much finer fellow than I am. To me it did not seem presumptuous to think of

Maud Langton as a man likes to think of the woman he wishes to make his wife. I knew I was not worthy of her, for, birth and wealth apart, few men are worthy of a beautiful, pure woman; but I hoped, somehow, that things might go well with us." Here his voice became thick and he turned his head aside. Continuing after a moment he said, "Well, well, it's all over now. I won't say that I shall forget her quickly, but I'll try not to remember her too well."

I was pleased at this manly determination, and, pressing my lips to his sleeve, stole a silent kiss. Poor Will, engrossed as he was with his own misfortune, how little could he imagine the sister he loved so well had but lately been subjected to an insult, against which his own rebuff was but the ghost of a wrong.

"I am glad you take it like a man," I said. "You must not think that all women are as selfish as she. You will forget her in time, dear old fellow, for she is not worthy of remembrance.

Then you will find that there are other women equally as beautiful."

"I shall offer no other woman my name," he said moodily.

"Offer her yourself, Will, and you'll find her think little of the name. If I were a man like you, no calamity on earth should cow me."

"I wish you were a man," he said earnestly, his face assuming a strange look of concern. "A man can struggle, can put up his hands and hit his opponent back; but a girl—what can she do? Do you know, Flos, I used to think that there was no man fit to kiss your lips—unless it was poor old Arthur—and now I wonder if they can get past the fact that you are a currency girl."

Poor Will! He little knew how his idol's lips had been desecrated, how she had fallen from her high estate. What would he think could he only know? I hid my face against his shoulder as I answered, "It will concern me little what they think. I shall never marry, so why

should I trouble about the vague future?"

"Of course you will marry," he said with a laugh, "as your mother did before you, and as your mother's mother did before her. Why, I was almost beginning to suspect that there was something between you and Captain Langton."

Almost beginning to suspect! The dear, blind creature.

"What nonsense," I replied with an attempt at petulancy. "Captain Langton and I were very good friends. He was always exceedingly kind to me."

"So I thought."

"Really, Will, if you are going to insinuate in this horrible manner, I think I shall leave you to yourself." And so away I walked, glad of the opportunity thus afforded me of beating a dignified retreat.

## CHAPTER IV.

THE next two days were spent by me in a strangely objectless manner. I went about the house as usual trying to interest myself in the domestic affairs of our simple establishment, but I now found the concerns of other days petty and tedious to a degree. I could not even be cajoled into the manufacture of one of my famous quince and apple pies. Strive as I would to forget the days I had passed at Langton, I could not for a moment banish them from my memory. My own sense told me that all was over between us, that he would go his way and I mine, for, after what had passed, I did not think he would dare make any further advances even of the most honourable nature. He could not

possibly imagine that I should forget the insult he had offered me, and, unless he were the vainest of men, his innate delicacy—for I hold that no one is utterly devoid of that quality—would warn him to forbear; for surely he must know that I was not the sort of girl to lightly take or forgive a wrong. No doubt he saw that. He had played his hand and lost. He would go away, and in the pleasures of the city forget even that he had tempted a soul to destruction. Then after a few more years of dissipation he would marry, like the rest of his class, and another woman would come to Langton. Perhaps I should be there to see. She would flash through the town by his side, as I had done, and all my dreams would vanish in the dust raised by the wheels of her coach.

“You are not yourself, Sis,” said Harold, as he and I sat in our old seats on the verandah towards the evening of the third day. “I have been watching you ever since you came home, and I am

perfectly convinced that you don't find the old place exactly as you left it."

"You have a wonderful imagination, Master Harold," I said somewhat sarcastically, for I was in that nervous state which warmly resents any little encroachment on its sensitive preserves.

"In this case one does not require an imagination," he answered with a smile, "but a pair of eyes. The glories of Langton have eclipsed the lesser dignities of poor old Granite Creek."

"Don't be foolish, Harold. You know you are talking a lot of nonsense. I wish I had never gone near the wretched place."

"Is it really as bad as that?"

I must own he had me rather sharply there, and that my confusion in consequence was extreme. "Oh, you are intolerable," I exclaimed angrily. "It's about time you devoted yourself to something more remunerative than watching other people's actions and construing

them to suit your own ill-natured disposition."

"If I were like Will," he said gently, turning two reproachful eyes on me, "I would do instead of talk; but, you see, I am only a cripple, and my doing consists of talking. If I love you, Sis, the fault is yours, not mine. If I am jealous of what I love, it's only human nature, isn't it? But, perhaps," he added sadly, "a cripple's nature is warped like his body, and altogether different from other people's."

I never could be angry a moment when he took this tone, so I held my burning face down for him to kiss.

"I suppose I am very trying," he said, "but you understand me, don't you? Will, dear old fellow, is proud of you in his own big-hearted way—I know he thinks there is not another girl like you in the country—but, Sis, he doesn't love you in my way."

I kissed his pale brow and brushed back the hair from his throbbing temples,



and again and again I swore my silent oath that I would prove worthy of this devotion. A marked race we may have been, but it rested with ourselves whether that mark grew broader or fainter.

“Harold,” I said, “you must try and believe that I am the same girl you knew before I went to Langton. If I have seen some things there which make me think, you must not imagine that I have forgotten everything else. To you, at any rate, I shall always be the same. And when father and mother go, as in the course of nature they must before we do, haven’t I promised to stay on here and keep house for you and Will?”

“For Will, perhaps,” he said, “but for me—no.”

“You are despondent to-day?”

“Is that anything new?” he asked with a sad smile. “But look, Sis, look,” cried he, rising suddenly in his chair; “look who is coming.”

One glance was enough for me. I felt the blood rush in torrents to my face,

and my body was seized with a sudden vague trembling. There, not a quarter of a mile down the road, coming along at a swinging trot, was Captain Langton. A hundred bewildering thoughts rushed through my brain. What could he want? Why was he coming here? I had hoped that we had said good-bye; for notwithstanding his promise, which was half a threat, to see me again, I believed he would considerably spare me any further embarrassment. Indeed, to put it plainly, I did not think that he would have the impertinence to search me out after what had been. Therefore I could not regard his coming with anything but dismay, though that dismay, conceal it if I will, was tempered with something very like a glow of triumph.

Harold's eyes flew rapidly between me and the advancing figure, but I no longer thought of hiding my confusion, for my heart and brain were too full of the excitement of his coming for me to consider the proprieties.

“ A good stepper,” said he, referring to the horse.

“ Yes.”

It was just like him. When he could have approached me with advantage, he drew back and remained mute. Perhaps he needed no words of mine. My face must have appeared to him like an open book.

In the meantime Captain Langton rapidly approached the house, and just as the first thought of beating a retreat suggested itself to me, he caught sight of us and raised his hat. It was too late to go now, so I leant against one of the verandah posts, coolly enough it must have appeared to him, and watched him ride up and dismount, though all the time my heart seemed to cry aloud in its dumb, inarticulate way.

“ I have come to say good-bye,” he exclaimed as he advanced towards me with outstretched hand, the same frank smile on his handsome face. “ We are off on Monday.”

“Indeed.”

He looked at me in his strange quizzing way.

“Maud begs me to tender you a thousand apologies for her non-appearance; she was extremely anxious to come, but the gigantic preparations for this journey of ours have quite upset her.”

Now, knowing that Maud was really as placid and unexcitable a creature as I could well imagine, I at first felt inclined to resent this most palpable falsehood, but thinking better of it, I only smiled and said I was sorry she had not come—an untruth as obvious as his own.

“I know she particularly wished to see your mother,” he went on, “to whom I should also like to say good-bye.” Here he looked uncommonly hard at Harold.

“I will tell her you are here, Captain Langton,” said the boy, shuffling hastily to his feet.

“On no account, no. Pray don’t disturb yourself. I am really in no hurry.” But Harold, who was quick to take a hint, hobbled off without returning an answer.

As soon as he had disappeared in the house, Captain Langton strode quickly to my side, endeavouring to seize my hand.

“Florence,” he said, “do you know why I have come?”

“To say good-bye,” I answered, looking him steadily in the face.

“To make one last appeal to you,” he added passionately. “For the last three days I have been like a madman. I have striven hard to forget you, to forget what we have been to each other, but have found it impossible. I cannot live without you. Dearest, I——”

“Hush!”

I drew back from him with a little gesture of fear, and he too drew back from me, for at that moment the rustle of mother’s dress warned us of her approach.

“So you are going on Monday, Captain?” she said.

“Yes,” he replied, “we have decided on Monday now, and I can’t say that I am looking forward to the change with all the pleasure I anticipated. I have come to the conclusion that Langton is not such a bad old place after all; or, I suppose, the idea of possession makes it seem sweeter. But where is Mr. Hastings? I’m afraid I shall not have another opportunity of saying good-bye to him.”

“This is his Boorta day,” said mother. “He always goes to the yards on Saturdays.”

“How unfortunate.”

I couldn’t help looking at him, the arch-hypocrite, for he knew as well as I that father always attended the cattle sales on that particular day. Indeed, I might have guessed that he had chosen his day accordingly. He saw my look, and understood its meaning; for the ghost of a smile passed over his face and his eyes seemed to say, “Yes, you are

right. I did know all about it, but I wanted to see you only."

And so he chatted on quite amicably for some time, till looking suddenly at his watch he arose to his feet and declared that he must be moving homewards, as he yet had a lot of work to get through, and that the servants were always so confoundedly indolent unless well watched.

"But, by the way, Mrs. Hastings," he added, "I was forgetting Maud's request. If you could spare her a few of your famous pink roses, she would be ever so much obliged to you."

"Certainly," cried mother, "she is welcome to anything we grow or have, or you either, sir," she added sweetly.

"Thanks so much," he said, and I thought he looked just a little embarrassed; "it's awfully kind of you."

"Not in the least. Here, Flossie dear, run down and cut Captain Langton a bunch from Harold's tree."

He looked at me to see how I would

84 *The Confessions of a Currency Girl.*

take the order, but perceiving me immediately prepare to obey, said, "Really, Miss Hastings, I—I don't want to put you to so much trouble."

"It's no trouble," I said, turning to go.

"Then as I am an excellent hand at doing nothing," he replied, laughingly addressing mother, "I'll go and help her."

And so after me he came right down the long garden, and stood beside me while I gathered some of the choicest blooms from Harold's tree, speaking no word the while.

"Will that do?" I asked, holding out a gorgeous bunch of roses.

"Florence," he answered, looking at me instead of the flowers, "I want to speak to you."

"But the flowers."

"Bother the flowers."

"Oh," I said reproachfully, "and I have picked you the very best of them."

"It was like you, sweetest," he said tenderly. Yet I could see that the flowers concerned him but little, so little,



indeed, that my suspicions as to the truth of Maud's request were at once confirmed.

"You were not told to ask for these roses?"

"No," he said, "to tell you the truth I wasn't. I wanted to get you away from the old lady, and couldn't think of a better story."

"I am surprised at that," said I meaningly.

"Are you?" he laughed. "I suppose you gave me credit for a better invention?"

"I certainly did."

"Well, it answered, didn't it? and what after all is a white lie more or less?"

I was afraid Captain Langton's lies had hitherto been mostly of another colour, and I should not have objected to hearing him told so, though as yet I had not sufficient assurance to undertake that mission myself.

But in the meantime we walked slowly along, there being still for me a strange

charm about him, till we reached the old summer-house at the bottom of the path, before the entrance of which he stood, saying, "Let us go in here for a moment. I have much of importance to tell you."

Having expected as much all along, I was not unprepared for this sudden suggestion, so into the summer-house I went and quietly sat myself down, he taking a seat beside me.

"Florence," he said, attempting to take my hand, "I have come over here to-day once more to beg your pardon, once more to tell you that in spite of whatever I may have said or done, I love you most sincerely, and that if you throw me over you will ruin me body and soul."

"Captain Langton," I replied, and my heart beat wildly while my brain wondered and wondered if his heart were truly prompting his utterance, "I forgive you with all my heart, and I pray that you will never mention this distressing subject again."

"Don't go," he said, seizing me sud-

denly by the waist as I prepared to arise ;  
“ sit down and listen to me. You tell me not to mention this affair again, but don't you know you might just as well tell me neither to eat nor sleep, for you are food and sleep to me—the very essence of life. Why should a little word have sunk this gulf between us ?”

“ Because you cruelly presumed on your position and abused mine.”

“ I was wrong,” he said humbly, “ and I am willing to make any atonement.”

“ There can be only one atonement. Let us go our ways and hear no more of this.”

“ Anything but that—that I cannot do. I cannot, will not part with you. Have we, then, been so little to each other that you could wish to say good-bye like this ? You surely did not fool me into the belief that you cared for me, only to throw me over when your fancy palled ?”

Ah, heaven ! And yet how could I lay bare my heart and tell him all. So I tried to laugh indifferently, though half-

hysterical it must have sounded, and said, "I think we had better not go too deeply into the cause."

This, coupled with my apparent confidence in myself, angered him exceedingly.

"I see," he said bitterly, "you are like the rest of your sex; you were attracted by that golden glitter which you affect to despise."

In his calmer moments, I know, he would be sorry for having used these rude words, but like all favourites of fortune he was hasty and imperious, and could not brook the slightest restraint or opposition. In a moment I was all aflame and ready, metaphorically, to spring upon him; but suddenly recollecting that the golden glitter had not been without its attraction, I subsided within myself and uttered a low laugh. "You still hold a very high opinion of me, Captain Langton."

I am sure he thought I was purposely teasing him, though could he have felt the pitiless throb, throb of my pulses he

would have known that it was play of a very terrible kind. His brow lowered and he gave me a very ominous look, while, with a palpable effort, he swallowed his resentment.

“You know what I think of you,” he said. “Why do you wilfully pervert my words and put an entirely different construction upon my meaning?”

“Don’t you think,” I asked, “that we had better put an end to this folly? If you have other meaning than your words convey, I cannot be expected to understand it.”

“Then understand this—I love you.”

“I cannot understand that.”

His brow grew black again, but he answered quietly, “Then you are denser than the rest of your sex.”

“No doubt.” And again I rose to go.

“Damnation!” he exclaimed fiercely, forcing me back on the seat, “do you want to drive me mad?”

At this I smiled superciliously, thereby casting a reflection on his present sanity.

"Listen to me," he said savagely, evidently reading my thoughts, "it would be a bad day for you if that time should come."

"I am afraid, Captain Langton," I replied, "that I have allowed this interview to last a little too long. We do not understand each other; we never shall."

"But we must."

"Must?"

He strode up and down the narrow limits of the summer-house for a moment or two as though grappling with some weighty project. Then he turned and faced me, and in his eyes was a look I had never seen there before.

"Yes," he answered, and his voice sounded hard and cruel, and was in perfect harmony with the savage aspect of his face, "We must understand each other. It would be better for you and yours."

"Your words imply a threat. I must request you to be more explicit."

"No, no; why should we quarrel? I

love you, dear, and would not harm you or yours for the world."

"I confess that I cannot comprehend you. Yet if you have the power to injure me or mine, pray don't let any sentimental considerations stay you."

"Curse it!" he exclaimed passionately, seizing me by the shoulders and shaking me violently, "who are you, that you should give yourself such airs? Haven't I humiliated myself enough for you? What else do you want me to do?"

"Leave me, that is all. If you do not, I shall call for help."

He laughed grimly. "Don't be a fool. Who can help you if I like to put my foot down. To whom can you appeal if I say there shall be no appeal?"

I looked at him in wonder, believing for the moment that his reason had quitted him. Seeing the mute appeal on my face, he continued as mysteriously, "It were wise to listen to me calmly, and not thwart me, as you seem bent on doing. As

I can make, so can I mar, and I will—I will, by God ! ”

Though terrified at his vehemence, and though only vaguely comprehending the meaning of his wild talk, I yet had sufficient resolution to answer with brave words, however feeble the spirit was that prompted them.

“I do not know what you mean,” and to me my voice sounded hard and full of contempt, “but you talk like a coward and a braggart.”

For several moments he looked at me as though he could scarcely believe his ears. Then he laughed harshly, strangely. “By George ! And you professed to love me once, and I, like a fool, believed you. But don’t think that you shall play fast and loose with me. You have maddened me, and by heaven you’ll have to pay for it.” And in a moment he had me in his arms and was kissing me with all the fervour of his wilful nature.

“Let me go,” I gasped, struggling wildly, “how dare you ? ”



“Promise, then.”

“I will not.”

His arms pressed me closer, closer, till I thought he would have killed me.

“Help, help!” I cried, now thoroughly frightened.

“You idiot!” he exclaimed roughly.  
“Why do you make that noise?”

Yet the noise notwithstanding, I heard the hurried rush of feet on the gravel outside, and the next moment Will stood in the doorway. The Captain released me with a gesture of annoyance, and I, burning with confusion, for now I would have given anything to undo the mischief, retreated farther back into the bower and stood there quivering painfully.

“What’s this?” said Will, after gazing at us for several moments in blank amazement.

“It means,” said Captain Langton, “that I love your sister, and that I have asked her to be my wife.”

Will looked from one to the other in-

credulously. "Is this so, Flos?" he asked.

I bowed my head still lower, hoping he would take it for a sign of affirmation.

"Then why did you scream for help?"

"Oh, my dear fellow," cried the Captain laughingly, "I'll explain all about that presently."

"She will explain," said Will in his quiet way, a way none the less decided and authoritative on that account. "What is it, Flos? Speak, tell me, dear." But I could only bound into his arms and fling myself sobbing on his breast.

"This must not end here, Captain Langton," said Will meaningly.

"What do you mean by that?" asked the Captain haughtily.

"I mean," said old Will, and I felt his body grow stiffer as he spoke, and the hand which held mine crushed my fingers like a vice, "I mean that I will allow no man to insult my sister."

"Really, Hastings," was the disdainful reply, and herein Captain Langton showed

a decided lack of judgment, "I think you forget yourself."

But Will, who was no respecter of money, nor persons either unless they showed themselves worthy of respect, answered hotly, "Probably, but I cannot forget you."

There was a covert allusion in this which caused the master of Langton to grow suddenly pale. Turning sharply on Will with an oath, he said, "I asked your sister to marry me, and it's a d—d sight more than she deserves."

Will's face grew whiter than the white angry face before him, and he drew back his clenched fist as though to launch it at the Captain, but, clinging to his arm, I implored him to desist. "Don't quarrel, don't quarrel. For heaven's sake, let him go."

"Go, then," said Will, shortly, sharply, and in a tone of such command that it must have fallen on his opponent like a lash; "quick, quick, or presently I may hurt you."

But instead of seizing his opportunity, the master of Langton merely looked Will disdainfully up and down, a smile of contempt creeping round the corners of his mouth. "I must say you are exceedingly generous. But if this had happened in the old days, I would have had you flogged for daring to speak to me in this way."

Though the Captain was talking arrant nonsense, there was no mistaking his meaning. Will uttered a mighty oath. His white face flushed scarlet in a moment, and drawing himself up, much like a dog when it prepares for a jump, he sprang at his adversary. There was a short scuffle and a crash, and then Captain Langton was knocked backwards against the trellis-work of the house. In a moment, however, he was on his feet again, and with an angry cry he rushed at Will. For a moment they sparred round each other, both with faces as white and fixed as the faces of the dead, and then they closed. From side to

side they swayed, now against the frail pillars of the house, which quivered ominously, and now backwards and forwards across the floor, no sound escaping them but their hard breathing, till they fell heavily to the earth, Will uppermost. Soon they were on their feet again, and facing each other, both faces distorted with passion. Then was it I rushed between them, and, throwing my arms round Will, implored him to desist.

“I think we had better wait for a more favourable opportunity,” said the Captain, coolly.

Will bowed. “As you please.” And then he took me by the hand, saying, “Come,” and led me back to the house, from one of the windows of which I beheld his late adversary limp over to his horse, mount it, and ride slowly away.

## CHAPTER V.

HERE, then, was a painful end to what had been a bright, if transient dream. I shuddered every time I thought of that dreadful scene in the rose-strewn summer-house, and for a full week after I went about the place nervous to a degree, trembling at every sudden sound, no matter how familiar. Was I sorry for it all? Heartily, with the strangest sorrow imaginable, for it was not unmixed with a certain glow of triumph. I knew that this last scene would effectually sever the ties which bound my lover and me, and my heart beat ominously, with a sickening dull pain, in spite of my resolve to put the shadow from me; yet, on the other hand, there was no end of satisfaction in the knowledge that I was still the beloved of those nearest to me, and that,

notwithstanding my love and my dreams, I had, first of all, remained true to myself.

It was agreed between Will and me that no mention of this affair should be made to our parents, for not alone would they have been powerless to aid us, but it would have caused them anguish inexpressible. I know the very thought of such a thing would have half turned father's brain, for he was most jealous of our meeting with our due portion of respect. Mother, dear soul, would have been the last on earth to think of such a thing befalling her child; but had she known, and the why and wherefore of it all, I do not think she would ever have held up her head again. Harold, I am sure, suspected that everything was not exactly as it should be, and on one occasion he even tried to draw me out, but failing in his attempt, quickly dropped the matter, for which I was heartily glad, as I knew his discretion would forbid him breathing his suspicions to another.

And so a week dragged on, life at Granite Creek progressing at the snail's dreadful pace. Oh, how I chafed under my thoughts and emotions ! I grew peevish, irritable, and hated with an intensity hitherto foreign to my nature every clump of trees and every hill on which my eyes had lingered so often and so lovingly : ay, even the great grey plains over which Will and I had scampered early and late, in storm and sunshine, when the thick frost lay on the rank grass, or the dust whirled in blinding clouds driven furiously onward by the scorching winds of the burnt-up north. They seemed to be of me then, dear almost as a part of myself ; now they were but a pain and an annoyance. I grew almost to envy the very cattle in the paddocks ; and of Will, who once more sought the refreshing atmosphere of the "Shearer's Rest," whereby he might drink and make merry, and forget, if that were possible, I was profoundly jealous.



All this time we heard no word of the master of Langton, a circumstance which troubled me not a little, for I had not yet forgotten his thinly-veiled threats against me and mine, threats which, in the face of what had happened, he might not stay to execute. Did I think that he would carry out any plan of injury against us? Truly at first I did not, taking his words to mean but so much angry talk consequent upon his repulsion; yet the more I thought of it and him the more terrified I became, for I believe that a passionate man scorned is a more formidable creature than the proverbial woman. And he was one who had grown accustomed to conquest. Purse-proud, and haughty to everyone excepting me, I knew the thought of defeat, and at the hands of a currency girl, would rankle and seem unendurable to him; and, moreover, if one half of the stories concerning him were true, he was not the one to stick at a trifle for revenge. Regret, I knew, was useless, and yet I would have given

a good ten years of my life never to have looked on him, or if he had never looked on me. Each morning, as I awoke from my unrefreshing sleep, I would ask myself, "Will it fall to-day?"—meaning the ruin he had threatened—but as the days rolled away, one after the other, and the storm broke not, I grew more composed and thankful. "He loves me after all," I would say to myself, "and love can forgive everything." And a softer feeling for him, a feeling which claimed kinship with that which filled my breast in the first days of our meeting, would steal in upon me, and, so curious is a woman's heart, at such times were he but there to plead, I could have forgiven him all. For, after all, how can a woman forgive not when she loves? And though what love I might have borne for him should have perished by his ingratitude, are we so fond of playing the martyr that we will not even dream? And then think of my surroundings. The quiet homestead, the cheerless

plains, the eternal bush. I could not get away from myself even though I wished it. The solitude made Harold a poet; it would have made me a maniac.

One morning, exactly two weeks after that dreadful scene in the summer-house, Mr. Mackenzie, the manager of Langton Station, rode up to Granite Creek and inquired for father—no absolutely novel proceeding, yet one which I now viewed with considerable alarm. On learning, however, that father had gone to Wallan, the manager drew a big, legal-looking envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to me, telling me to be sure and give it to father as soon as he returned. I took the letter in to mother and told her what had happened, and though she looked rather nervously at the formidable thing, having placed it conspicuously on the mantelpiece, she never thought of opening it. I, however, was all impatience, and had I been the wife instead of the daughter, I am much afraid I should have broken that seal. But then, had I

not been anxiously expecting something from Langton Station, and might not this be it?

When father at last returned, mother took the letter to him in their room, and for a long time after I heard them talking, very seriously I knew by the deep tones of his voice. I doubted not that the blow had fallen at last. Only, what was it? I think I should have gone mad had not tea been announced at that moment. Now for a surety I should know what had happened. So, rushing to my room, I hastily plunged my face in cold water, and then, feeling a little relieved, made my way to the tea table. Will and Harold were already seated, and mother was just seating herself as I entered the room. Hers was the face to which I naturally turned, and, as I expected, it bore traces of severe anguish. But I had only time to steal this one quick glance when father entered and took his seat at the head of the table. It was a long time before I could summon up sufficient

courage to look at him, but when I did I saw that he too had found the contents of that blue envelope anything but satisfactory.

I never remember a more wearisome meal than that. I ate, as in duty bound, though every mouthful nearly choked me. Mother, however, made no pretence of eating, while father simply toyed with his food. We were silent too, so much so in fact that Will at last wanted to know what had given us all the blues.

"First tell me," said father, looking round on his three children, "if you would like to leave the old place?"

I did not answer, feeling a great lump rise suddenly in my throat, but Will replied, "Do you mean clear out of Granite Creek?"

"Yes," said father.

"Well, that's not very likely, is it?" laughed his eldest born.

"More likely than you seem to think, Will. I have to-day received a letter from Mr. Mackenzie in which I am

informed that Captain Langton has decided to call in my lease of Granite Creek. You know, I suppose, that the lease has run out these five years?"

"Quite well," muttered Will, who had grown suddenly blood-red and then as white as death; "but I have heard Mr. Langton say that it was to be made over to you and your heirs for ever."

"He said so," answered father, "when-ever I broached this subject to him, and he meant it too; but the deeds were never drawn up. Consequently we have no legal right here, and Captain Langton, if he choose, may at any moment order us to pack up and go." There was so much bitterness in his tone as he spoke that I looked up wondering, scarcely recognizing the voice.

"But it's infamous," said Will hotly. "Are you sure Captain Langton understands what his father's intentions were?"

"I understood that he did," was the reply, "but not dreaming of such a

contingency as this, I never at any time gave the matter much prominence in conversation with him. If my good friend, his father, had not been smitten down so suddenly this thing would never have happened. It was of this lease he was thinking when, on his death-bed, he sent so hurriedly for me. I must apologize to you, children. I am greatly to blame. By the aid of a little judicious foresight all this unpleasantness might have been averted."

"Still," said Will, "who could have thought that Mr. Langton would die so suddenly? It is a pity you did not make your footing secure when you had the chance; yet, I suppose, most men would have done precisely as you did. If the worst comes to the worst, we can go and begin a new life in a new part of the country."

"I'm glad to see you take it in this way, my son; it is a comfort you can little imagine. Yet I have no doubt that when I fully explain to Captain Langton

how I stood with his father he will reconsider his decision."

"The devil take him and his decision," says Master William hotly. "I'd rather crack stones all the days of my life than that you should truckle to such a fellow."

"Hush, dear," cried mother, looking quite terrified.

"His private life concerns us little," said father quietly. "I think we had better leave it alone."

"No good can come out of it certainly," was the somewhat graceless reply of his eldest born. "Yet I am firmly convinced that your endeavours to gain a remission of our sentence will be so much valuable time wasted," and with this parting shot he arose from the table.

Outside I found him pacing up and down the garden, and immediately joined him.

"Well," he said, ejecting a great cloud of smoke as he spoke, "it's come. I knew the dog would soon bite us some-



where. Pity I didn't wring his neck when I had my hands on him."

"What shall we do, Will?"

"Do! Why, clear, I suppose," he laughed. "It's a coward's blow though, Flos. By George, I thought he was more of a man."

I thought so, too, but I did not speak, for my pride had received a cruel shock.

"Perhaps when father has seen him they will arrange things satisfactorily," I suggested somewhat weakly.

"No," said he, "they will come to no arrangement satisfactory to both sides. Captain Langton has got his knife into us and he means to keep it there."

"And this is all my fault," cried I passionately. "I wish I had never been born."

Will caught my hand in his and squeezed it tenderly.

"You must unwish that wish, Flos. Will not my love, the love of us all, outweigh the petty spite of a dissolute scoundrel? Don't you know that I am

prouder of you at this moment than I ever was before ? ”

It was sweet to hear these dear words, overwhelmed as I was with guilt and wretchedness, and I flung myself on his breast and wept with a sad sort of joy. We were still a loving and united family, and while we remained so were proof against the venomous attacks of the envious and the hateful.

Early the next morning father rode over to Langton to interview Mr. Mackenzie, the manager, and during his absence mother and I wandered about the house like a pair of spectres, while for hour after hour Harold sat in his chair, his book unopened beside him, his great dreamy eyes gazing wistfully out across the well-known landscape. Every time I passed him he looked imploringly at me, a look which plainly indicated his wish to be taken into my confidence ; but I could not tell him. Indeed, it seemed to me as though my secret must henceforth be guarded with greater surveillance.

About half-past two in the afternoon father returned from Langton, and I could see by the sad smile which wreathed his face as he greeted mother and me that his errand had been a futile one. He must have seen the vital question in our eyes, for he shook his head sadly as he advanced towards us. "I saw Mr. Mackenzie," he explained, "but could get little information from him. The orders have come through Captain Langton's lawyers. Granite Creek was wanted for some new wool sheds. So we shall have to pack up, dears, but as they have very considerably given us a couple of months to do it in, we shall have plenty of time to look round for new pastures."

"Where you and the children are," said mother, "there is happiness enough for me. It won't be without a pang that I shall part from the old place, Frank, but I'm ready and willing to go."

"Always the sweet helpmate and comforter," said father, as he took her head in his hands and buried his lips

in her silken, silvery hair, "always my better angel." And truly like an angel she seemed as she looked up into his face and smiled.

"But there is Captain Langton," she said. "You will see—you will write to him?"

"Impossible."

"Impossible?"

"Yes, Captain Langton is on the sea. He sailed for England a week ago."

"Then our last hope is gone?"

"Gone." And he led her into the house as he spoke.

This last piece of information completely stunned me, for I had determined, if all else failed, to go to him myself and implore him, for the love he had once professed for me and mine, to spare my parents this last humiliation. It would be a fearful ordeal, I knew, and one which would lay open my most vulnerable parts; yet for their sake I would have done more than this—what, I dared not even think. Now, however, my hopes and

fears and resolutions resolved themselves into nothing, and I was left to mourn the sorrow I had created.

And so almost immediately preparations for our departure were begun, and once we had hit upon our new home, which was a small farm about twelve miles the other side of Wallan, things began to shape themselves with remarkable rapidity. The extra sheep and cattle were driven into Boorta and Wallan, for it was our intention to only comfortably stock the new land, and there sold, but as prices were ridiculously low at that period we made little by the transaction. Still father and Will, with a couple of our old hands, worked hard outside the home from morning till night, while within mother and I used equal dispatch, so that in something under six weeks from the date we had received notice to quit, we were ready to depart.

Ella, Mr. and Mrs. Wallace, came rushing over to Granite Creek in their new buggy immediately upon receipt of

the intelligence that we were leaving the old place, and Mr. Wallace was both loud and deep in his condemnation of Captain Langton. Mother took Mrs. Wallace away with her into her room, and I can somewhat easily guess how the two old friends talked of the past, the present and the future; the past which might have been so happy, the future which could not be. I know mother had looked forward to ending her days in peace at Granite Creek, content to live the quiet life of one who has hoped and lost, and who has no more wish to remember, or be remembered by, the world. Father, I know, for men always complain more loudly than women, had no thought or wish outside his own household, and many a time have I heard him dilate with pride on the wonders he had worked with the once sterile soil of Granite Creek, and declare that Will should step into as neat a property as there was the whole country round. Alas! for his dreams; but then, alas! for all our dreams.

And now the eve of our departure at length came round. It was the last night we were to spend beneath the old roof, the roof that had sheltered us so long, under which we children had all been born and had passed the happy days of our young life—sunny days in which no cloud ever came to frighten us with its dull shadow, or cast a momentary darkness across the clear look-out of our lives. We were no cowards then; the great English language possessed for us no spirit-stealing word. Will was a young hero delighting in noble deeds; Harold a brave sweet singer teaching the world how to be great and good; I a dreamer of dreams, too, happy as theirs, but to be no more realized. What a golden age had passed without our knowing it!

That night was the most utterly wretched one I had ever spent. I wandered aimlessly, hopelessly about the place, a choking sensation in my throat, my heart cold and dull and heavy. Even

the sweet companionship of Ella, who had insisted upon staying with me during the last days, could not raise me out of the despondency into which I had fallen ; and when she at last mounted the trap beside Will, who was to drive her back to Wallan, I am ashamed to confess that I experienced a certain sense of relief. Now I could give way to my tears unchecked, and though I blessed her as they fell, I was glad to be alone. And when the night drew in, and the moon began to rise out of the great plains, flooding the world with legions of mysterious shadows, I crept like a guilty thing through the back door down into the garden, and there bade a sorrowful good-bye to every flower and tree I loved.



## CHAPTER VI.

EARLY the next morning we were up and stirring, and though I had slept but little that night, and felt tired and languid when the knock came, I was yet glad to get up, if it was only for the sake of breaking the monotony of my thoughts. In the house everybody was busy, and the horses and carts, the latter partly loaded, were standing at the door. I too set to work, and for an hour forgot some of my wretchedness. Then breakfast was announced, and after we had all eaten a somewhat excited meal, mother and I went away to put on our hats and dust-coats—to prepare for our last drive from Granite Creek. She, dear soul, went about her preparations like one in a dream. She spoke not at all—I do not

think she dared speak for fear of breaking down—but whenever she caught me looking at her she smiled, smiled as a martyr at the stake might. Father, too, looked pale and very serious, but as he and Will worked as though their lives depended on our getting away within a certain time, there was no gauging their real thoughts or feelings. Harold looked on from his seat in the verandah, dry-eyed, but thin and pale as a ghost. He rarely uttered a sound, and he tried hard to smile when spoken to, but I, who understood his heart so well, could almost read his thoughts, and I knew that he too kept silent because he dared not speak.

At last we all got under weigh, Will driving one of the waggon's loaded with furniture, and one of the men the other. Then father, mother, Harold and I mounted the trap, and for the last time we drove down the old familiar path, out into the no less familiar road; by trees, shrubs, dilapidated fences, all of which seemed to beckon and bow mournfully to

us as we passed. And when we came to the rails where years before Will had thrashed the obstreperous Patsy Dillon, the whole scene flashed vividly before my mind's eye. My terror and my ignorance, and Will standing there with clenched fists and flashing eyes because the little ragamuffin had called him a convict. Ah, me, I wondered what it all meant then.

"Sis," whispered Harold as we began to mount the little hill which lay some three-quarters of a mile from the homestead, "take a last look at the old place." And turning round, for he and I sat in the back seat, I saw away across the plain, nestling amid the trees which we had planted, the roof of our old home, and my eyes grew dim with the scalding tears that would fall, and through a film as of mist and pain I watched its well-loved outline fade and fade till we crossed the brow of the hill and the whole scene was hidden from view. And that was the last I ever saw of the dear old place, for it was pulled down shortly after our

departure. Harold nestled closer to me and slipped his little cold hand in my burning palm ; and thus we drove on in silence over the dusty road, through the town of Wallan, and then once more out into the bush.

About three o'clock we arrived at our new home, which, if not so large and prepossessing as Granite Creek, was yet more prettily situated, being flanked on two sides by the primeval bush, and on another, about three miles off, by a low range of well-wooded hills. There was not another house in sight, which made the surrounding hills look very weird and lonely, and I almost suspected that father had purposely chosen such an out-of-the-way place. Here at any rate he could lead a life of quietness, he and the wife who had lovingly clung to him in weal and woe, who sighed for no other companionship than his, who sought no other love on earth than his love. But for us, for Will and me, it was different. We had both tasted of the tree of knowledge,

and though the fruit had turned to ashes on our lips—the Dead Sea fruit of these later days—it left a memory which we could not forget, and which, perhaps, we would not if we could.

During the next two days we were all busy decorating and arranging the rooms, and when we had completed our task the little place looked wonderfully cheerful and home-like, and if we continually regretted Granite Creek, we yet had gratitude enough to thank Providence for the comfort of our new surroundings. True it was lonely, terribly lonely, but I had experienced so few of the pleasures of life,—and those I had tasted had left a most bitter flavour in my mouth,—that at times I was not at all adverse to burying myself in these gloomy solitudes, like poor Eloisa, “The world forgetting, by the world forgot.” I suppose some such sentiments come to most of us once in a lifetime. I could almost smile now when I think it over, only I can’t see anything to smile at. At any rate my first week in

our new home was a singularly wretched one, and not till Ella came over to stay with me did I begin to feel myself again. And then being sadly in want of a confessor or confidant, I suppose, I unburdened myself of the history of my affair with Captain Langton, nor did I forget to narrate Will's story too, well knowing that I might place implicit confidence in her; and while she duly sympathized with me, I knew that she was thinking of the slight put upon the young giant, and wondering how any woman could have done it.

As for the young giant in question, he, so it appeared to me, seemed about this time to grow extremely restless, and after the work of unpacking and rearranging had been satisfactorily accomplished, that restlessness assumed a still more formidable shape, till, out of pity for him and anxiety on my own account, I was forced to approach him with the subject.

“So I look miserable, do I?” he said,

with a strange laugh. "Well, Flos, my looks reflect my feelings."

"But why should you be miserable?" I asked, for I would rather be wretched myself than that he should suffer. It seems natural enough for a woman to complain. She may go about with a long face bewailing her sorrows and her pains (and what pains she suffers too!). She is a privileged being. But to see a man bowed down beneath the weight of pain or sorrow is to me the saddest sight imaginable.

"Of course I oughtn't to be," he replied, "and at times I feel half ashamed of myself, and try to get rid of the idea, but it sticks there, Flos, and it will beat me in the end. I know I ought to be thankful that things are no worse, and, taking all things into consideration, think myself a very lucky fellow, but I can't, I can't, and that's the end of it."

"And what is this dreadful idea of which you seem so much afraid?"

He laughed bitterly. "Then if I must

“speak plainly, Flos, I don’t think this family has much chance in this part of the country, and, since the old man has no intention of leaving it, I have come to the conclusion that—that I will. In the first place I have no taste for farming, and in the second, I would rather go where everyone does not know my history. By-and-by I may forget a little, and then I shall feel a man ; if I stay here, God knows what will become of me. Do you not think the project a wise one ?”

It was some time before I could reply, the proposal startling me considerably ; yet a few moments of thought sufficed for me to look upon it with his eyes. “ Yes,” I answered, “ I think it is a wise one, though it will break my heart to see you go. There is little hope for you here, and this is not the sort of life a man like you should lead. It will be a terrible blow to us, dear, but I feel that you are right. Poor mother, what will she say ?”

“ Dear soul,” he said, and I saw his big eyes grow suspiciously dim. “ You’ll



cheer her up, won't you, and tell her it's all for the best?"

"Trust me."

At that moment Ella approached us, and to her I made known Will's determination.

"Going," she said incredulously, looking falteringly at him, "going where?"

"I don't know," he answered.

"But, Will, isn't it very risky?"

Will drew himself up to his full height and extended his big arms. "How can anything be risky while I have a pair of hands like these? They have done a man's work for years, and I think I may trust them a little longer."

"Oh, yes, of course," said poor Ella, "I know you are awfully strong, Will. But to go away—it's so dreadful."

"But not so dreadful as to remain."

"I don't understand that."

"Don't you?" He looked so closely at her that she was forced to hold her head down. "Well, well," he went on, "it's not a very pleasant topic, Ella, so

the less we say about it the better. Tell old Arthur, won't you, that I shall never forget him wherever I go, and that no other fellow shall steal in and cut him out. As for you," and here old Will's confidence forsook him and he grew slightly agitated, "as for you, who have always been such a true friend to us, I—I shall always remember you, too, with feelings of the deepest affection, and I hope that you will sometimes think of me."

"Sometimes," gasped poor Ella, who was really in a dreadful state of agitation. "I shall think of you always, always."

The situation was now growing serious, and I would have given much to be able to steal away and let them work it out unobserved, but I foresaw that any movement on my part would break the spell, and so I stood still and watched.

"I am afraid somebody else would not appreciate quite so much devotion," said he with a queer, tantalizing laugh.

That was like Will. Mother used to say she believed he would sit up and tease somebody on his death-bed.

Ella flushed rather deeply, I thought.

"I don't understand you, Will. No one has the slightest right to dictate to me in any way."

"Not even Mr. Mulroyd?"

Mr. Mulroyd was the new manager of the bank at Wallan, who had been known to pay sundry little attentions to Mr. Wallace's pretty daughter.

"Not even Mr. Mulroyd."

"Then you must pardon me for even hinting at the silly gossip," he said. "You know I claim the old friend's privilege of being jealous, for I had heard that Mr. Mulroyd had advanced several steps in your good graces." He did not mention the source of this information, though I and Ella guessed that it had come from that perverted Polly Lane.

"Then you heard what is false, Will, and I am surprised that you should listen to such nonsense. Mr. Mulroyd is

nothing to me, nor can he ever be anything."

"I somehow thought it was all a yarn," said Will, "though strange things do happen, you know."

"But nothing so strange as that."

And indeed it was strange for anyone who knew her devotion to Will, to think of her casting down that magnificent idol for such a poor little image as Mr. Mulroyd, an individual whom Will could have tucked away under one of his big arms.

"I am very glad to hear it," said the big fellow, looking earnestly into her face, "for I should be awfully jealous if I thought it were true."

"And what right would you have to be jealous?" she asked.

"None at all," he replied, "yet I should be all the same."

"Come, come," I said, thinking they had gone quite far enough, "no love-making before my eyes, if you please. If there is to be any of that going on, just

let me know, will you, so that I may slip into my vanishing cloak?"

"How can you!" cried Ella, blushing furiously, turning a pair of reproachful eyes upon me.

"There will be no love-making," says old Will solemnly. "My love-making days are over."

"And mine," said Ella, but so gently that I just caught the low sound.

That same evening Will unfolded his plans to the family, and, as I expected, mother wept bitterly, declaring that she would never consent to the scheme; that she would not even hear of it; but father, who listened in silence to his son's project, and the reasons which prompted it, at length said, "Though I deplore your determination, my son, and the causes which have led up to it, I can only wish God-speed to your enterprise. I had hoped, truly, that you would stay at home and carry on the farm when I am gone, and see to your brother and sister, and your dear mother—if I should happen to

go before her ; but as that may be a far-off event I have neither the right nor inclination to baulk you. Hitherto you have all seemed children to me, and I suppose you always will, but to others you are man and woman, and must do as men and women do. You start badly, Will, handicapped as you are with the onus of my sin ; therefore you must be doubly strong and bear your two-fold burden with a brave heart. It will seem heavy sometimes, heavier than you can bear—as it does now—but it cannot harm you if you yourself be brave, which I believe you are.” And here he walked across to his son, and in the midst of a solemn silence, broken only by mother’s low sobs, he took him by the hand and murmured, “ God bless you.”

Poor old Will looked like breaking down altogether, but, after a moment’s desperate struggle with himself, he said, “ I shall try, never fear. When a man goes out into the world with his heart full of love, as I shall go, he feels equal

to a thousand perils. You understand me well, sir, and you need have no fear for my mother's son."

At this mother's sobs burst out afresh, at which Will strode over to her and flung himself at her feet, his head in her lap, as he used to do when he was a boy; and she stroked his golden hair and wept till he, with his hopeful chatter, brought back the sad smiles to her pale face.

Early the following morning he set out with his swag on his back in true bush fashion. Father wanted to buy him a horse, but he would not hear of such a thing, declaring his intention of beginning at the lowest rung, because then he was sure of rising as he marched through the world, as he could not very well descend any lower.

"Shanks's pony has carried many a better man to fortune," said he. "It is a willing horse, if slow."

And so he said good-bye to father, and kissed mother and Harold again and again.

"I shall come back soon," he said, "so don't cry, mother. I know you would rather I went out as a man than stay at home and grow fit for nothing."

"Yes, yes," gasped poor mother between her heart-breaking sobs. "Heaven bless you, my son, heaven bless and guide you." And that was all she could say.

"As for you, Harry," he said, tenderly pressing his brother's little hand, "remember you are to make all the fame for the family. When I come back I shall expect to find you a great man."

"Dear Will," said Harold, suddenly flinging one arm round his brother's neck, "I shall be something greater soon, never fear." And old Will smiled and kissed him once more, little guessing the meaning of the poor boy's words.

So away the wanderer went, Ella and I accompanying him for some little distance on the road, she, poor thing, looking as white as a ghost, the dark circles under her large eyes giving them an almost unnatural brilliancy.



When we reached the junction of the Boorta Road, for along it Will was to travel, we all stopped and said good-bye. After kissing me, and whispering much that was meant for my ears alone, he took Ella in his arms and kissed her; and what he said in her ear I don't pretend to know, but whatever it was it had the effect of making her ten times sweeter than she ever was before.

## CHAPTER VII.

WITH Will went, or seemed to go, all the vitality of our life. Active, energetic and cheerful, he carried about with him a charm against melancholy which was not without its effect on all with whom he came in contact. I know I missed him dreadfully, for during our lifetime, bound up as we were together and sharing our bitter secret, we had been more than brother and sister—we had been good comrades and close companions. Ella and I, for she stayed with me for more than a week after his departure, roamed moodily about the place, she never weary of talking of him, I never weary of listening. We were like sheep without a shepherd, or children without a parent. “I wonder where old Will is now?” I would ask, and she, sighing, would echo “I wonder,” and

gaze with wistful looks across the illimitable stretch of tree tops. Poor Ella. I think I could make a pretty shrewd guess at the words he whispered in her ear as he said good-bye, and though I felt glad that he had spoken them, I almost wished that he had remained mute. Mother, too, was one who suffered terribly during these weary days, and I am sure she could never rid herself of the picture of her son tramping his lonely way amid new scenes and new faces, buffeted by the world, perhaps trampled to death in the struggle. Of course she had never parted with any of us before, and her extreme solicitude made her imagine countless horrors, which I, as in duty bound, did my best to discount.

“Will is a man,” I would say, “a strong man, mother, and is perfectly able to take care of himself.”

“That he is,” Harold would chip in, “and the man who knocks him out will have to fight for his victory.” And so between us we did our best to cheer the

dear soul up ; but her heart was away with her eldest born, and I knew it would not come back till she heard his knock on the door.

Father went about his work as usual, only he was quieter and more reserved than in the old days at Granite Creek. Never a man to talk much, he had grown almost mute of late. There were none of the old glad evenings round the fireside now. With his pipe between his lips he would sit silent for hours immersed in a book, while mother's busy needle went click, click with tantalizing monotony. He rarely spoke of his son, not through any lack of affection, I think, but he seemed to purposely eschew all topics pertaining to the past. Yet, whenever we got a letter from Will in which that worthy wrote cheerfully of the progress he was making, father's eyes used to shine with pleasure and his voice grow soft as a woman's. "I think the lad will succeed," he would say ; "he is a brave boy." And we who knew him so well

understood that his heart was glad. But all the same a change was coming over him which threatened the peace of his life, and also endangered ours. He was, so to speak, the source of our stream of life, and whatever affected him affected us, if not to the same extent in a somewhat similar way, so that when he laughed we were happy, when he was despondent we donned our suits of black.

His manner seemed to undergo a complete change after Will left. He grew peevish, irritable, almost morose at times. It seemed as though he were angry with some invisible enemy—himself perchance—at war with fate and fortune. Hitherto he had struggled with indomitable determination to live down the past, and for a time had succeeded in being happy; but the prolonged battle had taxed all his patience and courage, and I could see that he was wearying of the fight. No longer had he the hope and resolution of youth to urge him on. His one wish had been that he might die, as he had lived, in peace

at Granite Creek, but when Captain Langton struck us that coward's blow it shattered the one hope left him. This he never mentioned in my presence—indeed, he made but little of the occurrence—but from the words mother dropped, and my own intimate knowledge of his nature, I knew that he at last was recognizing the futility of further effort. And so he went on with his work in his own moody way, speaking little, smiling never, resigned to hopelessness.

That mine was not a very enviable life at this period may seem a superfluous statement, but I understood the cause of our sorrow, and was sensible enough to regard it with no thought of petulancy. Indeed, I was too saddened at the thought of my parents' sadness to think that they might possibly have made my life a little brighter ; moreover, all my time was now taken up in attending to Harold, who, poor boy, had at last taken to his bed. I do not think our misfortunes improved his case, for from the time of our de-

parture from Granite Creek he grew worse and worse, his beautiful face growing so pale and thin that anyone less infatuated than I must have known that his end was near. It was the old trouble, the doctor said; the spine was too weak to bear its burden, and if the patient lived it would be as a life-long cripple on his back. Poor Harold knew, though he wore a brave face in spite of such knowledge, that his life was at a discount. Yet he never complained, and for every little attention showed unbounded gratitude. Hour after hour I would sit reading beside him, or fanning him while we talked over the old days and the old hopes and ambitions, now, alas! never to be realized. He knew this, too, and the thought preyed heavily on his mind. Indeed, I am not certain that he did not fret more about his lost hopes than the thought that henceforth there was to be neither peace nor pleasure for him on earth, or that at any hour he might be called upon to undertake the great journey. Physically,

he at times suffered agony, but the pain engendered by the thought that he had lost all hope of doing something in the world was, I think, the more acute. Often I would catch him crying silently, the cause of which he would endeavour to explain away; but he could never deceive me. I was too well acquainted with his sad thoughts not to know the different symptoms of physical and mental pain. By degrees, however, owing to his increased bodily weakness, he gradually grew more resigned to his lot and was consequently more approachable on the latter malady, so that I was enabled to show the fallacy of deep grief for such a cause. I pointed out how few there were who succeeded in any great undertaking considering the number who set out with the loftiest aspirations; thereby hinting that after all it might be possible for him, even if he lived, to fail—my object being to show him that only the very gifted and fortunate had much chance of reaching the top.



"Perhaps you're right," he answered wearily, "and as I am not fortunate it is more than probable I am not gifted."

But this would not do for me. "Gifted you certainly are, Harold, whatever your fortune may be. Yet many would think it no small fortune to have your gifts."

"You always believed in me, Sis?"

"Always, dear."

"Well," he said, "you shall not be disappointed."

I knew what he meant, poor boy. He meant that I should not be disappointed, because he would never go in for the great prize; but I answered, "You do not know that either. Who shall say what you may or may not be in a year's time?"

He smiled in his sad way as he answered, "Who shall say, indeed? One thing only I know. It is not I whom Heaven has chosen to be the first great Australian poet."

I couldn't keep the tears back, so I had to turn my face aside while he went

on in his low, sweet voice. "It's hard to give up all my dreams, Sis, and such dreams too. But I know I shall never live, and even if I did, the future would still be doubtful, for in this, as in all things, the many are called but the few are chosen. And yet I might have succeeded, and by my individual efforts alone have immortalized my country. Of course it was a dream, a foolish, fond sort of dream, the very thought of which overwhelms me now and makes me ashamed to tell it. Yet once, when I had hope, it seemed easy enough of attainment, and I never doubted that the day would come when the world would listen to my new song of this strange, new land. Like a great voiceless infant has it lain during all these ages waiting for some sweet singer to wake it into life. And he will come one day, the new Orpheus, and striking his lyre will hold the world entranced, and call into life the vast forbidding Bush, and people every desolate plain and

mountain with living wonders. It's no dream, Sis. God will send that man one day, and he will make of our dear country a shrine at which the millions yet unborn shall worship. And I was vain enough to hope it might be I. Well, well," he went on, the tones of his voice sounding like a suppressed sob, "it's all over now, Sis. I shall die like the thousands about me, and my countrymen will never know how much I loved them, and how I coveted glory because I knew it would reflect on them."

I could not answer him. My heart was too full for words. So I fell on my knees beside his bed and pressed my face deep in his pillow, weeping silently.

"Don't cry, dear," he whispered. "I shall be much better off then, if we can only get to think it. I would rather die, if it please God, than live to see all my hopes and ambitions die about me. It will be hard to leave you and mother, and to go without seeing poor old Will; but you'll tell him all about it, Sis; tell

him how I loved him, and how proud I was of him, and that I was never envious of him, only sorry, only sorry that I was not more like him. There, there, don't cry any more, or you'll make me cry, and I don't want to do that, because there's nothing to cry for, is there?" And he threw one of his poor wasted arms round my neck and pressed his delicate face to mine, telling me how much he loved me, how proud he was of me, and that he did not believe a boy ever had such a sister; to all of which I responded with tears and caresses and many an inaudible prayer.

Still, the angel of death had set his seal on the lad's forehead, and though it is not in human nature to banish hope, that hope was so mixed with despair as to be scarcely recognizable. All that could be done to aid the sufferer we did, but our efforts merely kept the enemy at bay, staved off the inevitable for a time. Gradually he sank lower and lower till there was no knowing at what moment the end might come.

I remember being awakened one night by father entering my room, candle in hand.

"Come," said he in a strange, nervous whisper, "come to your brother's room."

"Harold is worse?" I asked.

"We think he is dying," he answered.

I did not cry, but a numb sensation took possession of me, and for a moment I felt as though I too were dying.

When I entered the sick room I found mother kneeling beside the bed sobbing as though her poor heart would break, while father, his face full of gloom and seemingly scarred with anguish, stood beside her watching with tearless eyes every movement of the dying boy. In a moment I was kneeling at the other side of the bed, and as soon as Harold recognized me he opened wide his great strange eyes, now greater and stranger than ever, and asked me to kiss him.

"Don't cry, Sis," he said, "there is really nothing to cry for. I am perfectly happy, happier than I have ever been

before. I feel no pain, and do you know, dear, I am so strong now that I'm sure I could walk if they would only let me try."

At this mother wept aloud, while between my sobs I whispered that we would let him walk when he got better.

"Come closer, closer, Flos," he said. "Put your arms round me. That's right. Ah, my dear, dear sister. I was dreaming just now," he went on, after a pause, in a low fast-failing voice. "I thought I was walking alone, upright, like other men. It was the old dream, dear, and yet not the old dream, for it was real this time. And as I walked among the people I noticed that they all bowed low to me, and with glad faces followed in my footsteps; and when I asked one who was standing by what it all meant, why they should follow me, he pointed to a golden lyre which I held in my hand, and upon which, unconsciously, I had been playing such sweet music that all who heard it forgot their pains and their sorrows and

followed me rejoicing ; and so, proud in my strength, and pleased beyond expression at the thought of giving so much happiness to mankind, I struck the lyre louder and louder, the music growing richer and fuller and more beautiful. And as I walked my step was as springy and light as though I trod on air, and thinking this strange, because I was a cripple, I looked down at my legs, and behold, they were perfectly straight : I gazed in a pool of clear water and saw that I was stronger and more beautiful than Will. And then a great happiness seized me, and falling on my knees I offered up a thanksgiving that I, the crippled currency boy, should be made as beautiful as the angels. And then, like a great wave of music descending from the sun, I heard a grand, sweet voice cry out, ‘Enter, thou weary one. We have no currency people here.’ ”

. . . . .  
And so the night dragged slowly on

till the morning, solemn and sad, rushed over the great world : and into the vanishing shadows of night poor Harold passed away.



## CHAPTER VIII.

PERHAPS I ought to apologize for dwelling thus on the gloomy side of the picture, but to me our sorrows have appeared more worthy of note than our joys, because the interest in them is stronger, and they have made, on me at least, a deeper and more lasting impression. That happiness had been ours, and brightness and gaiety too, it would, perhaps, be superfluous to mention, for in our peaceful home, when as yet we children did not know the mark was on our foreheads, pleasure and joy were sure to dwell. Yet the dark days have completely eclipsed the bright ones, and to narrate our foolish pleasures would seem to me both trite and commonplace. No doubt I am an emotional being, though before I set myself the task of

composing this history, I imagined that if not quite an unemotional creature, I was nevertheless not a little of a philosopher ; but when I sit down and think of the old times my emotions run away with my philosophy, and I am a woman first. But I am digressing, as the novelists say, and I am afraid we have not yet done with the darker side of the picture.

Harold's death cast a deep gloom upon the house, a gloom from which we never emerged. He had been so patient, so gentle, and had given promise of such talent that we had entertained the most flattering hopes of his future. Poor boy ! And yet not so poor if I could only think it. Terrible as it all was, it would have been more terrible still to live and fail. To sink back to the level of the millions, all his grand visions faded to nothingness, his wonderful hopes destroyed ; an atom of dust in the great whirlwind of the world. Himself a soured and whining mortal, envious undoubtedly, spiteful per-

haps. Death, at any rate, had spared us and him all this. Now we could dream of what he might have been ; live, as it were, in the glorious world that he had pictured, and say that had he lived he would have realized his own life's dream, which was that he should be the first great Australian poet.

Mother, who seemed to me to be somewhat failing of late—indeed, ever since Will's departure she had not been the same woman—broke down completely over this latest catastrophe, and for weeks after the funeral went about with a face so sad that my grief for Harold's death was lessened considerably through my anxiety on her account. Father, too, suffered more than words could tell, though he, manlike, said little, but went about his work in the old mechanical way ; yet the gloom deepened in his face, and his whole mien was enwrapped, as it were, in a cloak of hopelessness of the sombrest hue. Where it would all end was now the question, and I must confess to many a gloomy

thought as I surveyed our future prospects. That mother was really ill, though she never complained, I could not doubt. She bore the marks of suffering too plainly on her dear face. Father seemed well enough in body, but as if to counteract whatever good he might have derived from his physical well-being, his mental ailments streaked his sad face with great lines of woe. Then the dry season came and ruined our prospects of harvest; the sheep and cattle died for the want of grass and water; in the day the whole of the northern sky was black with the smoke of bush fires, and in the night these same fires glared round us ominously, as if but waiting an opportunity to spring upon us. While, to make matters worse, Will suddenly ceased writing to us about this period, so that we knew not whether he were alive or dead, a state of suspense and cruel conjecture which did not improve mother's condition. The last letter we had written to him had been returned through the dead-letter office

stamped "not known," so that till we heard from him again we could only guess darkly. Of course poor mother would insist upon the worst having befallen him. "He is dead," she would say, "dead, dead," and repeating that terrible word, in which she seemed to find a melancholy charm, would weep her broken heart out.

"No, no," I said, trying as I always did to restore her lost confidence, though I used to wonder at the cause of his silence till my own heart grew faint, "we must not think that any harm has befallen him. He was made to fight his way in the world, and he will; but he is poor now and the way is hard. He is the sort of man who must win in the end. Obstacles there will be to surmount, and many ills to bear, but a brave heart, mother, fears neither ill nor obstacle, and Will has that."

"God bless him," she said, "my handsome boy. But the taint, Flossie, I fear the taint."

I, too, feared it, but I did not say so. Poor old Will, he was heavily handicapped.

"Will is a man," I replied. "He must learn to bear his burden."

"Ay, poor boy. But he is a man as you say, every inch of him." It was pleasant to hear the ring of pride in her voice. "I would you were one, too, child," she added, "or that your future were secure."

"Don't think of me, dear," I said. "I am your daughter and Will's sister. I shall never forget that."

"Yes, yes, but a girl—all alone?"

I put my arms round her neck and kissed her. "But I am not all alone. Have I not you and father, and who knows but that Will may soon come back with plenty of money for us all?"

"Yes, yes, who knows?" And with a sigh she turned her face towards the distant hills—for she and I were sitting out on our verandah during this conversation—those hills behind which her son had

journeyed nearly a year ago. I turned with her and presently beheld, coming slowly along the road which led up to our gate, a solitary horseman. She saw him also and a sudden flush shot over her pale face.

“Is it he, Flossie, is it he?” she cried excitedly. “Tell me, child. My eyes grow dimmer every day.”

I knew whom she meant, and for a moment dared hope the wanderer was returning, for the man sat his horse like Will and seemed to be of the same size. But as he emerged more into the open, the sun caught his shining head-piece, and I knew it was a trooper.

“Not Will, mother,” I said. “If I am not much mistaken it is Sergeant Winton, of the Boorta police.”

Poor mother sat back with a sigh, and in another minute all doubts were set at rest, for the well-known figure of the sergeant loomed plainly in view.

“What can he want?” asked mother, surveying him with a look of uneasiness.

“What can he want but to see father?”

When the trooper reached the gate he dismounted very slowly and fastened his horse to a rail, and then with a quick, nervous look to right and left advanced towards us, his spurs clinking noisily as he walked. He was a fine-looking fellow and had the reputation of being one of the smartest and boldest men in the force, yet as he approached us he looked so extremely nervous that you would have thought he was about to apprehend, single-handed, a pair of Dan Morgans.

“Well, sergeant,” said mother, “what brings you over here to-day?”

Instead of answering he touched his hat, saying, “How are you, Mrs. Hastings—and you, miss?”

“We are very well, thank you, sergeant,” mother answered. “Won’t you be seated?”

The sergeant muttered something incomprehensible between his teeth, but which sounded like a polite refusal, and leant against one of the posts of the



verandah, twirling his moustache somewhat excitedly. I could not help noticing the man's strange behaviour, though the why or wherefore of it interested me but little.

"You have come from Boorta?" asked mother, by way of making conversation.

"Yes," said the sergeant.

"I suppose you saw my husband there?"

"Yes." The sergeant gave his moustache another excited pull.

"It's about time he came home, sergeant. You should have brought him with you."

"Yes," said the sergeant.

"Then he intended riding back with you?"

"Eh, what?" exclaimed the worthy trooper, starting from his reverie and curling furiously. "Yes, of course—no, that is—the fact is, Mrs. Hastings, I have some bad news to tell you." It was strange how the man suddenly blurted

out the truth after beating about the bush so long.

“Bad news, sergeant,” said mother, pressing her hand to her breast and trying to look brave. “What has happened?”

“Compose yourself, my dear madam,” said the trooper kindly. “But the fact is—Mr. Hastings has met with an accident.”

Mother did not speak, but she leant helplessly back in her chair, her face growing fearfully white. Her lips moved but not a sound escaped them. The mute look she turned to the trooper was the most piteous I have ever seen.

“What was it, sergeant?” I asked. “How did it happen?”

“A steer got loose somehow as Mr. Hastings was riding up to the yards. Frightened his horse, they say, and he was thrown.”

“Is he much hurt, sergeant?”

He looked at me and then at mother.

“Yes,” he answered in a low voice.

“Not—not—” I could not get the dreadful word out.

The officer bowed his head.

“Dead?”

“Yes.”

I could not describe the sudden fear which seemed to paralyze my every sense. I stood looking at the trooper with blank amazement, repeating the word, “Dead, dead?”

“Yes, miss. He was thrown on his head. Neck broken, they said. But look at your mother. My God, she’s dying!”

This brought me back to my senses, as it were, and I sprang to her, throwing my arms about her. But I felt no answering pressure from her arms, and when I kissed her lips they were deadly cold. No wonder the sergeant thought she was dying.

“Water, quickly,” I gasped, and away the great trooper rushed, returning immediately after with a cupful.

Then, without speaking, he and I set

assiduously to work to revive her, he patting and stroking her hands, I applying my handkerchief to her forehead in the form of a wet bandage. But it was a long time before she opened her eyes, and then it was only to smile faintly and request that she might be taken indoors out of the cold—a request, the fulfilment of which was rather puzzling. I looked at the sergeant and he looked at me.

“May I carry her, miss?”

“Oh, if you would, sergeant.”

“If I would,” he exclaimed. “Just as if I wouldn’t!” And without further ceremony he took her up in his arms and carried her as easily and gently into the house as though she were a sleeping child. Depositing her on the sofa, he stood back while I fell on my knees beside her and gave way to a flood of bitter tears.

How long this paroxysm of anguish lasted I have not the slightest idea. I might have fallen asleep, I might have fainted for all I recollect of it; but when I looked up once more I beheld the ser-

geant standing by the further window watching me earnestly.

“Can I do anything for you, miss?”

“Thank you, no.”

“But you will be very lonely here, you—excuse me, miss, but I think you ought to have somebody with you.”

“Could you, would you go to Mrs. Wallace and tell her what has happened?”

“With pleasure,” was the prompt reply.

“It will not put you to any inconvenience?”

“It don’t matter if it does. There, there, rest easy. Mrs. Wallace shall be with you in an hour’s time.”

“Thank you, sergeant.”

“No thanks, miss. Keep up your courage, that’s all.” And turning he quitted the apartment. A few moments after and I heard him gallop off along the Wallan road.

For quite an hour after the trooper’s departure I sat by mother alternately stroking her hands and freshening the

vinegar and water bandage which I had applied to her forehead. Once only during the whole of that time did she open her eyes, and my fears in consequence were naturally most alarming, but when she did open them she recognized me and smiled, and that repaid me for much of the anguish I had endured. She did not speak, but her eyes looked the love her tongue was powerless to frame. I felt all the horror and loneliness of my position keenly—the loneliness adding not a little to my other fears—so that I was much relieved when the sound of hurrying hoofs reached my ears, though I was none the less astonished when I beheld the sergeant, his face like a bit of beet-root, his coat white with dust, enter the room.

“You, sergeant!” I cried. “Where are the others?”

“Coming, miss—that is, I left them harnessing the horses. But as it’ll be quite half-an-hour before they arrive, I thought you might be a bit lonely.” It

was not without an embarrassment which necessitated a searching scrutiny of the floor that the honest trooper blurted out his apologies for his presence.

"It is very kind of you, sergeant ; though I hope you have not allowed your considerations for me to inconvenience you in any way."

"Not at all, miss. I am only too happy to be of service to you, though I am sorry you should have had cause to use me."

I thanked him with a smile—a sorry one, I'm afraid—and then returned to my seat by mother's side, while he, after quietly watching me for some time, stole softly from the room out on to the verandah, where, lighting his pipe, he began to walk slowly up and down.

Shortly after this, amid a great clatter of hoofs and wheels, the Wallaces arrived bringing with them the chief doctor of Wallan, an old gentleman who was reported to be a man of much skill and knowledge. He advanced to where

mother lay, white as a corpse, her white hair seeming to accentuate the awful pallor of her face, and I heard him mention, as he turned to Mrs. Wallace, who had thrown herself on her knees by mother's side, the word "heart."

"Is it her heart?" I asked, for I had long known that her heart was weak, and that from it we were to expect danger at any moment.

"I am afraid all is not as it should be with that organ," replied the man of prescriptions. "She seems to have had a very severe shock, and I think the best thing we can do is to put her to bed."

At this the sergeant, who had entered with the rest of them, advanced and offered his services as carrier, and soon we had mother carefully tucked away, with Mrs. Wallace, Ella and I as nurses. The doctor left us after promising to call again on the morrow, and the sergeant, too, rode off with many an expression of regret.

"I cannot tell you how sorry I am,



Miss Hastings," said the great simple fellow, holding out his hand. "It's little I can do for you, I know, but if that little is ever required you will send for me to do it, won't you?"

"It's very kind of you, sergeant," I began.

"Promise me, then."

"I promise you."

"Thank you." And away he stalked to his horse, swung his great frame into the saddle and once more set out at a mad gallop for Wallan.

Mother was still unconscious when I returned to the room, and the sad looks with which my arrival was received told me too plainly what Mrs. Wallace and her daughter thought of my chances of happiness. Not that I had ever thought much of them myself, though we will look at the bright side of things if we can. I did not say anything, but seating myself at the foot of the bed watched the poor white face before me and thought of that other face which she had loved so well.

He had left home that morning apparently in the enjoyment of excellent health, destined, so one would have thought, to live for many a year to come. Kissing me before he mounted his horse he told me of the present he was going to bring me home—and now he was dead. It seemed incredible, impossible! I think I was too bewildered to cry. I felt a strained, hard pain across my eyes, a rising in the throat which made it difficult for me to breathe; and when Ella stole to my side and put her arms about me, I could not help wondering what Will would say when he knew it all. I think I must have been half-mad—numbed, as it were. I know I thought of many things—some of them grotesque, too—which had no sort of connection with that which was upon my heart and mind.

At last the medicine from Wallan came—for whether it be necessary or not that prescription must be written—brought by a trooper whom Sergeant Winton had deputed as messenger.

“And if you please, miss,” said the man as he handed me the physic, “I’m to stay here to-night.”

“Stay?” I asked with an interrogating look.

“In case I should be wanted for anything. It’s the sergeant’s orders, miss.” And having explained himself thus briefly, the man saluted and withdrew.

“How thoughtful of Sergeant Winton,” said Ella. “I had no idea he was such a nice man.”

“I think he is very kind.” And indeed I was grateful for such consideration, for I always fancy that in times of trouble and sorrow the presence of a man, be he even a stranger, is a source of comfort and security.

We gave mother the medicine as prescribed, and watched for its effect with an emotion which scarcely permitted us to breathe ; but all through the long hours she gave no sign of returning consciousness. Once only her breathing grew heavy, which made us think that she was

coming to ; but our hopes were again destined to disappointment. All too quickly the fluttering ceased ; her breath grew fainter and fainter till at last it died away, and there was no motion whatever in face or form.

“ She is dead ! ” I cried.

Mrs. Wallace, who was kneeling at the bedside holding her friend's cold hand, answered me with a burst of passionate sobbing, between the intervals of which I could distinctly hear the trooper's spurs jingling as he tramped up and down the verandah.

## CHAPTER IX.

AND so on the same day the two hearts which had beaten only for one another, having no longer the necessity for action, ceased beating, and in the one grave were they laid side by side, separated not even in death. Many shadows had they seen, but many a sunny day had also been theirs, and if towards the end the clouds grew black and threatening, they could not obscure the glory which once had been. Peace was theirs at last. The long life of martyrdom, for such their equivocal existence must have been, was over. There were no currency people where they had gone. Their burden was at last laid aside, and on me, unhappily, devolved the task of bearing it ; a task so little in accordance with my spirits that I earnestly

prayed Heaven to spare me the infliction; to take me as it had taken them.

For the first time in my life I now discovered the value of true friendship, for during the next awful week, while I wandered helplessly, hopelessly about the house, the Wallaces took upon themselves the duties of the occasion, relieving me of even the slightest detail. I had a vague recollection that preparations for the funeral were going on apace, but as I was not asked to contribute any help I never thought of offering it. And then at length the day came for the last sad rites, and in the Wallan cemetery, close to poor Harold's grave, father and mother were laid in their long home. This last sad ceremony I attended with Mr. Wallace by my side—I the only blood relation of those two who had once been surrounded by friends and relatives, and who, even now, must be remembered by many a one in England. Sadly remembered though, I fear, for when mother, dead against the wish of her people, came out to join father

in his shame and his exile, they told her that she was bringing disgrace upon their name, and that for the future she should be as a stranger to them, she and hers—words which proved true enough, for from that day to the day of her death she had neither seen nor heard of them. And though in her more confidential moments she occasionally spoke of her young life, it was always with an effort not unmixed with pain. Father, also, had been treated similarly by his people. They had forsaken him in his hour of extremity, and from that day to the day of his death he had held no communication of any kind with them. Indeed he rarely mentioned his people or his country, and not till that memorable confession of his did we know that he belonged to a distinguished family, though it was evident to us from our earliest days that he was unlike the rest of the men about him—a superiority which I could not name distinguishing him from them. They, in England, had blotted his name out of the family records,

it is said, for his father, who was one of those persons who implicitly believe in the divinity of the English aristocrat, could not forget the shame his son had brought upon their house. Shame, indeed ! Poor father ! It was a long sad fight, but you had your wife and your children, and could count many happy days even as a currency man. But they have no currency men where you have gone, and it's all over now, isn't it ?

It was at this very gloomy period of my existence that the Wallaces proved how sincere was their love for me and mine. Left thus suddenly desolate, and, unfortunately, almost penniless, it is difficult to say what would have befallen me had I been thrown upon my own resources. This, however, was not to be, for these good friends at once stepped in and offered me the shelter of their home. " You are to be our child now," said Mr. Wallace kindly, " and if Will ever returns, why, he shall be our child too. There, there, dear, don't cry. They are happier



where they are, never fear." At which we all, that is Mrs. Wallace, Ella and I, burst out crying afresh. Ella threw her arms round me and called me sister, and Mrs. Wallace, looking at me through tear-stained eyes, declared, in the intervals of her sobbing, that mother looked exactly like me at my age. And so the end of it was that I took up my abode with these true friends, who, during the whole of my stay, treated me with the fondest love and deepest consideration.

Arthur had not been present during the funeral, the reason for which was that he was at that time engaged in his final examination, so that had he attended, as he wished to do, he would have been thrown back considerably, and would thus have lost the honour of being one of the few who never experience failure. But as soon as he had finished, without waiting for the lists, he returned to Wallan as quickly as the train and coach would bring him, and by the way in which he greeted me I knew that he had

not forgotten the old days at Granite Creek. He seemed to have grown very big and strong-looking since then, and I could not believe that nearly five years had elapsed since the night he gave me the half of his silver ring. How different all the world seemed to me now. What a lot I had seen and suffered since then. Out of respect for my sorrow he never mentioned that parting, or let me know whether his affections had undergone a change or not, though, if a woman may be permitted to judge of such things, I should say they had not. He was the same earnest, kind-hearted boy of our young days, and if his manner was sedate beyond his years, it did not ill-become him, his respectful ways contrasting agreeably with what I had been accustomed to of late.

One day he approached me with an open paper in his hand, his face betokening the deep pleasure he felt.

“Congratulate me, Flossie,” he cried.

“You have passed, then?”—for I knew

to what he referred, the wondering whether he would succeed or not being of late the principal topic of conversation among us.

“Yes, in the first half-dozen.”

“I am delighted to hear it, Arthur, and hope your success at college will be the forerunner of greater successes to follow. Do they know of it in the house?”

“Yes.”

“How proud they must be of you.”

“I think they are,” he said. “But I scarcely gave them time to congratulate me. I wanted you to know.”

“Then once more let me warmly congratulate you,” and I held out my hand, which he took, pressing tenderly. And, had not Ella at that moment appeared, her face glowing with pleasurable excitement, I do not know how far Mr. Arthur might have gone, for he seemed to be rapidly approaching that mood which is termed confidential.

“He has told you?” cried Ella as she

ran towards us. "Grand, isn't it? He's third on the list."

"He told me he was in the first half-dozen."

"Oh, that's his modesty," she laughed.

"All clever people are modest, you know—at least they ought to be."

"Now, don't you chaff me, too," he said, turning to me. "Three is in the first half-dozen, isn't it?"

"Isn't he clever?" said Ella in all seriousness, thinking only of the honour he had won.

"Very," I answered with a smile, thinking of his reply, which so discomposed poor Arthur that he looked quite ashamed of himself. "I have always regarded Doctor Wallace as an exceedingly clever man."

"If it's going to be like that," he said, "I'm off. When you girls can better appreciate the dignity of my title you may consult me free of charge." Saying which he walked over to his father and mother, who, like Ella, had followed him

out of the house, and I could tell by Mr. Wallace's cheery laugh, and by the pleased look on his wife's face, that they were more than proud of the achievement of their son. Here was the real thing after all, proving again how much better is steady application than your so-called gift of cleverness. As a boy Arthur showed to little advantage beside Will, while from an intellectual point of view he was so far beneath Harold as to be beyond comparison. Yet things were working out strangely, as they always do when fate regulates them. Harold, with all his aspirations, was gone, and into his grave had vanished all our high hopes; while Will, poor old fellow, was nothing better, if alive, than an outcast wanderer. Truly it seemed as though his prophecy was about to be fulfilled. Would the taint prove too strong for us after all?

I had been living in Wallan now close on eight weeks, and was at last beginning to take an interest in my new life, not that I could ever forget the dear ones who

had gone, but when the grave enshrouds our sorrow I think the heart of youth recognizes that it has a life of its own, and consequently is happily able, once the first paroxysm of anguish is over, to bear the calamity with philosophical fortitude. In my case it would have seemed like sheer ingratitude had I failed to profit by the kindness which surrounded me ; and though at times I could not help giving way to tears at the recollection of my utter loneliness, on the whole I was gradually growing resigned to my lot.

During these eight weeks of which I have spoken, I had one constant inquirer after my welfare. Never a week passed without Sergeant Winton putting in an appearance at the Wallaces' to make some inquiry respecting the state of my health, and if he could not see me he invariably confided in Mr. Wallace's office boy, and was even at times known to pester the different members of the family.

“ Is Miss Hastings well ? ”

"Quite well, sergeant."

"You are sure she does not suffer from the effect of that dreadful bereavement?"

"Quite sure."

"A brave young lady, Mrs. Wallace?"

"I think so, sergeant."

"And as beautiful as she's brave?"

"Yes, I think so."

"And you're sure it's left no lasting effect—not injured her in any way?"

"I am sure it has not."

"Thank you. You will tell her I called?"

"Oh, yes."

And thus, apparently contented, the worthy officer would mount his horse and ride away.

This little programme he had gone through once, and often two and three times a week, ever since that never-to-be-forgotten day when he rode up to the cottage and broke the death-dealing news. I was agreeably surprised at this unexpected proof of the sergeant's good heart, more especially as he had the

reputation of being a hard man and a pronounced misogynist, and I was not slow to let him see that I was pleased with his kindness and courtesy. How the poor fellow was in turn deceived, the following will show.

One day, calling as usual, he happened to find me alone—an apparently fortunate state, and yet a delusive one, as he would tell you. I was in the garden at the time, watering flowers, when hearing the clink of spurs on the gravel I looked up and beheld the big sergeant bearing down upon me, rather nervously I thought, and I recollect also thinking he looked remarkably well in his uniform—though the hideous square helmet that the police wear, which is neither one thing nor the other, detracts somewhat from a proper appreciation of the individual. He was a fine-looking man, however, helmet or no helmet, and if his face was a trifle too red he had a fine nose, and a moustache which must have made many a girl's heart ache. As he



approached me his extreme uneasiness seemed to increase, and unconsciously I was reminded of the sunny afternoon he rode up to mother and me with the news which struck her down.

“Good evening, sergeant.”

“Good evening, miss,” he answered, saluting. “I hope you are keeping well.”

“Quite well, thank you.”

“Gradually getting over your sad bereavement, miss?”

“I think so, sergeant, slowly.”

“You are sure it has left no lasting effects of a disagreeable nature?” continued the trooper, sympathetically.

“Indeed, I hope so, sergeant; though, of course, one cannot forget these things quickly.”

“That’s so,” said the sergeant. “Still, you’re sure you are better?”

“Ever so much.”

“That’s good.”

Then I went on with the watering, and though to him I must have appeared

deeply engrossed in my duty, I nevertheless managed to observe that, for want of something better to engage him, the sergeant began to shuffle first one foot and then the other, accompanying these desultory movements with a strange jingling of his spurs.

“ Ah,” he said at last, “ it was a sad day that, miss, wasn’t it ? ”

Knowing to what he referred I replied in the affirmative, but made no further remark ; at which he began to shuffle his feet a little more noisily, creating quite a hubbub as he kept time with his spurs.

“ I suppose you have just ridden over from Boorta ? ” said I, after a long silence, not that it mattered to me whether he had or not, but since he had been so kind in his inquiries the least I could do was to be civil to the poor fellow.

“ Yes.”

“ And what brings you this way so often ? ” I asked with a smile. “ Are you watching some poor creature in Wallan ? ”

The sergeant looked exceedingly embarrassed. "There is someone I have my eye on," he said, his red face growing a deeper and more alarming crimson.

"Is he a very desperate character?"

"Desperate," replied the trooper, trying to smile, "well, no, I should say not. You see, he's a she."

"A woman. How horrible."

"No—pretty as a picture."

"And you are shadowing her. Oh, sergeant, I'm ashamed of you."

"I'm almost ashamed of myself," was the reply. "At the camp they already guess that there's something in the wind, and if it ever leaks out I shall never hear the last of it; but, sooner or later out it must come, so I don't see why—"

"I'm afraid, sergeant, I don't quite understand you."

"Why, I thought it was as clear as daylight. I know I'm not up to much, not fit to hold your stirrup, and my billet's not one of which a gentleman would care to boast; but I—"

His meaning suddenly dawned upon me. "Sergeant, I—I never thought of this."

"Didn't you, miss? Well, it doesn't so much matter so long as you think of it now. I haven't much to offer you, but if you care for me, just say the word and I'm your man."

"But, sergeant, I—"

"If you object to the force, you know," he went on regardless of me and my interruption—for all the world like a man who has something to say and who has made up his mind to say it—"I can easily drop it. It's not what it was in the early days, and I daresay I'm not too old to tackle a new line. I'm not a bad sort either, miss, at least I think I'm not, and as for me being a woman-hater, that's all arrant nonsense. You are the only woman about these parts for whom a man could care, and that's why I have cared for you and no one else. I've admired you for a long time, Miss Hastings, if you'll excuse me saying so, but it was

only when I saw you in your trouble that I felt for you as I have felt for no other woman. And so I got to think about you more and more, and I used to wonder what would become of you if anything should separate you from these good friends of yours ; and it was then I said to myself, ‘ Sergeant, you must make her the offer. It’s a thousand to one she’ll laugh in your ugly face, but if she does it’ll serve you right for your infernal presumption.’ And so for the past month I’ve been trying to screw up my courage, and only now have I been able to screw it fast.” Yet notwithstanding this declaration of his he looked so flurried and nervous that I should feel inclined to say that little reliance was to be placed in his statement.

“ Sergeant,” I said, not a little affected by his words, “ I thank you sincerely for the honourable proposal you have made, and am only sorry that any words of mine should have led you to believe that I regarded you as other than a friend.”

"Your words have always been the right words," he said. "It is I who have been the fool. You'll forgive me, won't you?"

"I have nothing to forgive."

"You have a lot to forgive," he said, "and it was like my confounded cheek to come plaguing you. I knew all along that it was a piece of presumption, and I ought to have known better than show it, but I'm rather an obstinate sort of fellow and wouldn't acknowledge it. And besides," he added, looking me straight in the face with eyes as honest as the day, "you were a prize worth winning, and though I'm only a trooper I couldn't help having a cut in on the off-chance."

With difficulty suppressing the smile which his strange phraseology had caused to flicker about the corners of my mouth, I answered that all the honour was mine; that no woman could hope for anything better than the love of an honest man, and that I should esteem it a great favour

if he would honour me with his friendship in the future as he had in the past.

“And is it to be only friendship?” he asked, rather sadly, I thought, in spite of his red face. “Am I to abandon the hope of ever bringing off that off-chance?”

“If you will, sergeant.”

“Well,” he replied in a low tone, with philosophic gravity, “if it is to be, I suppose it will be. You’re sure you don’t mind what I’ve said?”

“On the contrary, sergeant. I feel extremely flattered.”

For a moment he looked at me doubtfully; then taking my hand pressed it warmly. “I’m sorry you don’t care for me,” he said, “not that I didn’t know as much, only that cursed obstinacy of mine wouldn’t let me acknowledge it. Yet if I can ever be of service to you in any way you won’t forget me, will you?”

“I promise you, sergeant.”

“Thank you.”

And so the big trooper took his leave,

his face no longer blazing with florid life, but tinged with an indescribable sadness. The boldness had disappeared from his eye ; he looked anxious and undecided, and I think he suffered deeply. That his affection for me was genuine I could not doubt, and as I conjured up many a little incident which had occurred since the memorable day on which he appeared as death's messenger, I wondered how I could have been so blind as not to perceive the drift of his attentions before. Poor old sergeant. Stimulated by honest sympathy, which may or may not have awakened a stronger feeling, he had determined to offer the orphan the shelter of his home, the protection of his name. To me it seemed ludicrous enough, for rightly or wrongly I had always deemed myself worthy of something higher than a police-sergeant, but to him, no doubt, it appeared quite congruous ; nay, who knows but that he may not have been stretching a point in offering his honest name to a currency lass ? At any rate,



after my rejection of his suit, his visits to Wallan grew conspicuously less, and it was only now and then, by the merest of accidents, that I saw him at all. Then, at least so I thought, his face had lost much of its old brilliance, his figure had grown slimmer, and he sat his horse not quite so squarely as of yore ; but whether it was fancy or not on my part I really would not like to say.

## CHAPTER X.

I HAD now been more than six months with the Wallaces, during the whole of which time they seemed to be perpetually laying themselves out to make me forget the sad past, or at least to lighten its memory. I was one of them now, they said, and henceforth my joys and sorrows should be theirs. That I appreciated such love and tenderness might go without saying. Indeed I grew to feel for Mrs. Wallace a reverence almost akin to that which I had felt for my own mother. I no longer wondered at the devotion and life-long friendship of the two. To me it seemed as though one had founded her style on the other, so that their better qualities (though I could never believe they had any which were not good) assimilated, so to speak, making them as

near perfection as human beings go. Even Mr. Wallace, of whom I had seen comparatively little, and of whom I heard much not over-complimentary to that excellent man, improved most marvellously upon a closer acquaintance. Indeed, I was not long in perceiving that most of his faults were mere superficial oddities, and that beneath a somewhat shaggy coat there beat an affectionate heart. He no longer "made conversation" when in my presence, but appearing natural and easy—himself, in fact—was found to possess but little of that pomposity which was supposed to be his prevailing characteristic. As for Ella and me—were we not always sisters? though our coming together, as it were, knit still closer the bonds of sympathy between us.

And yet, apart from the memory of my imperishable sorrow, I cannot say that I was altogether happy here. I know it sounds horribly ungrateful, and I feel myself tingle with shame as I make the

confession, and yet it was true, though why it should have been I can find no good reason for saying. Was it that I felt my dependence? I can hardly think so, for if I would not allow myself to be one of the family it was entirely my own fault. Yet not being of their blood, how could I be one of them, unless by marriage?—and that, too, might have been had not a perverseness seized me. The fact is, I could not love to order; and a strange sentiment, as foolish as it was strange, prevented me from forgetting the old days at Langton, days which, in spite of their cloudy ending, contained some of the brightest hours of my life. I don't know that I was in love with Captain Langton, neither do I know that I was not; yet notwithstanding my determination to act as though the past were but a memory, my eyes, dazzled by the light of those days, saw all other things in shadow. I had stared in the face of the sun, and my subsequent moment of blindness had expanded so

alarmingly that I knew not when it would end.

During the whole of this time Arthur treated me with the utmost consideration, never breathing a word of that affection which I knew he felt for me, nor taking advantage of any of the opportunities which chance threw in his way. That forgetfulness was not the cause of this unique behaviour I could see, for whenever his earnest eyes met mine there was something so intense in their gaze, so full of imploring, passionate entreaty, that at times I knew not whether he annoyed or terrified me. Certainly he had grown to excellent manhood during the period of his studies, which showed that he had not forsaken the cricket ground or the river. Indeed, if I recollect rightly, he had a fair reputation as a bowler and oarsman, besides being one of the best back players in the university. There was nothing of the shy boy about him now. To be sure he never lost the soft tones of his voice, or his quiet

manner, but his quietness was of the manly pattern, gentle yet firm, and about his words and actions there was a certain decision which rendered them singularly impressive. Knowledge had given him force of character, and whenever he said a thing it seemed the right thing, and whenever he did a thing he went about its accomplishment as though the result were a foregone conclusion. That is, except in his dealings with me. I think he thought too much of me to treat me as an ordinary human being. Though he loved his sister and worshipped his mother, I knew that in reality I was the only creature for whom he had eyes or for whom he had a heart. It therefore became a matter of much conjecture to me how long he could continue to suppress the natural promptings of that heart, my curiosity feeding my vanity and *vice versâ*. When, however, to my surprise, the days flew on without bringing the expected unburdening, I actually began to wonder if my egotism had not betrayed my better

sense. Yet I think women are not unhappy in deducing certain effects from certain causes, for when they act by instinct they invariably go near the mark. Therefore I was not greatly surprised when one day Arthur approached me saying he wanted to speak to me.

I had been playing the piano a moment before, and, when he entered the room, was engaged in hunting up a piece of music from a huge pile which stood on a small table before me. I felt my hands tremble as I lifted piece after piece, but still pretending the greatest assiduity in the search, I said, "Very well, Arthur; what is it?"

"I think you had better finish there first," he said with a nervous little laugh.

"Oh, I can listen," I added, also trying to laugh and perpetrating an equally feeble attempt.

"I would rather wait," he said. After that there was no more to say, so I turned and faced him. I confess I did not face

him as boldly as I should have done, or as bravely as I had faced him during a score of imaginary interviews; but, judging by the quick glance I got of his features, he was too deeply preoccupied to make a minute survey of each little detail.

“I have been wanting to speak to you for a long time,” he said, “but for certain reasons, which I need not mention, I have thought it better to defer the idea. You remember when we parted at Granite Creek?—it is more than four years ago now. We were boy and girl then, but I think I let you see even then what you were to me, and what I hoped you might be. Well, we are man and woman now, and I am the master of an honourable profession. My feelings have not changed since that night so long ago—unless it be that they have grown stronger with the years. I told you I loved you then, I love you more now, and if you will be my wife, dearest, you will make me the happiest man in the world.”



I did not answer but held my head down, fearing to look him in the face.

"You don't speak," he continued. "Perhaps I am rude, abrupt; perhaps I ought not to mention such things yet awhile. If so, forgive me, won't you, and put it down to my love which is bursting with impatience?"

"There is nothing to forgive," I answered. "Indeed I feel honoured—" And then I began to stammer—for somehow this stereotyped phrase of "feeling honoured" sounded horribly weak and unreal when addressed to him.

"It is I who should feel the honour," he replied quickly, "but I thought you understood all that. You know I am not much of a ladies' man, and whenever I make a compliment I feel a fool; but there should be no need of compliments between us. We must be sincere, you and I." He came over and sat beside me on the couch.

"And why should we be more sincere than other people?" I asked, trying to

infuse a little flippancy into the conversation.

“ Because we are not as other people—at least, you are not to me. Do you know that never a day has passed during all these years in which I have forgotten to think of you? Do you know that it is to you, and you alone, that I owe the honour of my degree?”

“ To me?”

“ Yes, to you, for the knowledge that you would be proud of my success urged me on, and though at times I knew the task to be a hard one, I could not fail because I thought always of you as the reward.”

“ Of me?”

“ Yes, of you. I have succeeded, Flossie, as you know, and if my success at college may be taken as an earnest of my success in the future, I may hope that you will not be ashamed to bear my name.”

“ Ashamed! Oh, no, no! But, Arthur, it is all so sudden—so, so—” I stammered, at a loss what to say.

“Sudden,” he answered reproachfully, “and I have thought of it day and night for years. Still, dearest, if you would rather think it over, don’t answer now, but go and have a talk with Ella or mother. They are good friends and will advise you rightly. Only remember that your decision will make me the happiest or the most wretched of men.”

Here I saw my opportunity, and was quick to avail myself of it.

“It is scarcely generous of you to name two such distinct alternatives. It leaves me such little grace.”

“It is not fair,” he answered honestly, “yet feeling it to be true it came out unthinkingly. You understand me, and must know that I could not be anything but generous to you.”

“I am sure of it,” I said. He looked at me as if expecting me to say more, but what could I say that would in any way conduce to his hopes or happiness? I could not tell him of what had occurred at Langton, and that in consequence I

had not the slightest wish or inclination to marry any man, and that the greatest kindness he could show me at that moment would be to leave me entirely alone—a thing he would have done could he only have guessed how earnestly I wished it. Continuing, however, to press his suit with a persistency which was absolutely suicidal—for when a woman is not in the humour there is nothing she resents more than this masculine perseverance—he, not content with my silent refusal, must needs insist upon knowing why I would not marry him—a perfectly natural wish, I suppose, but one which not unnaturally proved very painful to me.

“I’m afraid, Arthur,” I said, and I know there was a ring in my voice which was far from conciliatory, “that you are a little too curious.”

“Inquisitive, you mean. Well, have I not a right to be?” he asked somewhat aggressively.

“I’m afraid I cannot argue that with you.”

He flushed rather painfully, but he was an obstinate fellow in spite of the seeming evenness of his disposition.

"You won't, you mean," he said with a curious little laugh. "And why won't you?" He looked inquiringly at me as if expecting an answer, but as I replied not, he continued: "Is it that you are afraid of wounding me? If so, I beg of you not to spare me, but tell me truly if there is anyone for whom you care more."

"No, no."

"Then there is no truth in this Captain Langton business?"

"To what do you refer?" I asked, fool-like, well knowing what he meant. But I was angry with him for probing at my weak spot, and meant to make my anger cover my unreasonableness.

"Forgive me," he cried, "I did not mean to offend you, indeed I did not, but I love you so much that the very thought of you caring for another is like death to me."

"Don't you think, Arthur," I said

coldly, yet civilly I hope, "that you might make yourself conversant with the facts of a case before you begin to state it?"

"But I have heard so much of you and him," he blurted out as impetuously as a boy. "I wish to God you had never gone near the place. I have never had a moment's peace since I heard the first rumour."

"And why should it have affected you so deeply?"

"Because I was afraid of you."

"You are honest at least. And why should you think so ill of me?"

"I knew you were a woman," was his ungracious reply.

"But, of course," I replied with a tantalizing smile, "you did not know me well enough to trust me?"

"I did not say so. Ah, if you only knew how much I love you, you would look with different eyes on my doubts and fears."

"I am sorry for you, Arthur. What can I say more?"

Yet this interview, though it produced an understanding between us, tended not to the peace of my mind; for, through Arthur, it affected the whole household, and I thought, though I am sure it could have been nothing but fancy on my part, that both Mr. and Mrs. Wallace were colder to me after my rejection of their son's proposal, they being perfectly well aware of his affection for me, and most desirous of seeing us united. I even imagined that Ella's manner had grown more constrained, though, poor girl, she tried her hardest to let me see that I should always be her sister in love if not in law. Then, too, when I once hastily entered the room where Mr. and Mrs. Wallace were sitting talking, I distinctly heard him say, "Fool of a girl. Doesn't know her own mind," and by the guilty way they both started upon observing me, I knew it must have been me of whom they were speaking. And then one afternoon Mr. Wallace himself approached me on behalf of his son, and in his sharp, short,

“going, going—gone” style pointed out how well suited we were to each other, and hoped that I would not have any fear of the future, as Arthur was a good boy and that he (Mr. Wallace) would see that his son wanted for nothing. To this I replied that I cared nothing for monetary considerations (neither did I then), that I respected and admired Arthur exceedingly, but that I had not the slightest inclination to marry.

“Well, well,” he answered somewhat testily, “I suppose a woman is not expected to give a sound reason for her actions. Gets over me altogether. Seems to me you might do a great deal worse.”

“I do not think I could well do better.”

This answer seemed to strike him as being rather singular and not a little ambiguous. He looked at me in his quick, quizzing way—the look that I have seen come into his face when he has been dealing with a facetious bidder. At length, seemingly reassured with his quick



search of my features, he said, "You're a curious girl, Flossie, and quite baffle me—but there, I never did pretend to understand women, though Heaven gave me one of the best in the world. I'm sorry for the boy, because he's a good boy, but if you don't fancy him there's an end of the business. Keep this interview quiet, that's all, and on no account breathe a word to him of it. He'd never forgive me."

And so he left me, but with him he did not take the sting of those words, "You might do a great deal worse." I am quite convinced now that by them he did not mean to insinuate anything rude or disrespectful—it being but the blunt expression of an honest opinion—yet they nevertheless conveyed to me an idea which was distasteful. It almost seemed as though he thought I was under an obligation to marry his son, and that I ought to consider myself an extremely fortunate young woman in getting such a capital chance, so that this, coupled with my dependent

position, did nothing towards the conciliation of my rising insubordination ; for towards change my spirit of late had developed a marked tendency. Therefore, shortly after this, when Mrs. Wallace, unknown to either son or husband, approached me on the same subject, I could scarcely restrain the anger which rose to my lips.

“ You know,” went on good Mrs. Wallace, quite complacently, “ the poor boy is desperately in love with you, Flossie, and I am sure he would make you a good husband.”

“ I know he would,” I answered, for I still had a profound respect for Arthur in spite of the machinations of his parents.

“ And then think, dear, it is a match your mother had set her heart on as well as I. Ah, many a time we’ve talked it over together and pictured the two families living in perpetual harmony. It was the wish of her life, as it is of mine, and even your father, who was

never a talkative man, had likewise set his heart on it—or if he did not say as much,” she added, as if correcting herself, “he gave us to understand that he was not opposed to it.”

“I am sure I could never hope to do better,” I said, and I was conscious of my voice taking a certain tone of irritability, “but I do not want to marry, indeed I do not.”

She received this explanation of my apparent perverseness with an indifference which was far from soothing, for when a young girl declares she has neither the wish nor intention of ever marrying, she likes to think that all her listeners are not sceptical.

“The poor boy is shockingly changed,” went on the fond mother, ignoring the obvious fact that I was in no sympathetic mood. “He has not eaten less since he was short-coated, and I’m sure, by the dark circles under his eyes, that he sleeps but little.”

This was a trifle too much for poor

weak human nature. I might have borne a voluminous report of his sighings and his sleepless nights, but when it came to such an utterly feeble and prosaic detail as short-coating, my long-suffering spirit rose in revolt.

"I'm afraid," said I, and this time there was no mistaking the tone of my voice, "that your motherly solicitude causes you, unconsciously, to exaggerate his ailments, and I am surprised that he should have sent you to relate them."

"My dear Flossie," she said, and her pale face flushed crimson, at the sight of which my conscience immediately upbraided me for my rudeness, "you misjudge both me and my son. Arthur was, and is, entirely ignorant of my intention; and, moreover, he would be very angry if it came to his knowledge. If I have offended you, my dear, you must pardon me, and put it down to a mistaken sense of right, for I only wanted to do what I thought was best for you both. There, there, child, we'll say no more about it."

And so she kissed and left me, and though for the next week things moved on the surface in apparently the same old way, beneath there was an undercurrent which was quietly affecting the whole. It, after all, was not the kind of life I had been accustomed to. The days at Granite Creek had been so full of freedom that I could not tolerate the thought of a tame submission. Submission to what? I might well ask myself the question. Yet to me there was a sense of oppression, or suppression, in the life I now led. There is a freedom of the mind which is not less glorious than that of the body, and this I had not. One cannot have everything, I suppose, but living under observation, a perpetual shadowing, as it were, was not at all suitable to my temperament. I therefore set about thinking how best I might right my imaginary wrong, and as I was considered a fairly well-educated girl, I at length determined to face the world and fight my own battles. Will had done it long ago—poor old

Will!—and though I was not a man, I think I had some of my brother's spirit. Anyway, I had no sooner given birth to the thought than I was determined upon putting it into execution.

Great was the consternation in the Wallace household when I made known the project. Ella cried and implored me not to think of such a thing; Mr. Wallace pooh-poohed the idea as one too utterly ridiculous to entertain for a moment; while Mrs. Wallace, with tears in her eyes, declared that she had received me from my mother, her life-long friend, as a sacred trust, and that no earthly consideration would ever let her part with me. Yet in time my determination won the day, and when I had succeeded in allaying her fears, it was she who found a home for me with one of her friends in Melbourne.

## CHAPTER XI.

AND now the preparations for my setting out went speedily along. Luckily Arthur was away on a visit to Sydney, so that I was spared the pain of having to encounter his long face at every turn. Ella, however, was but a Job's-comforter of a companion, and reiterate my love for her as much as I might, I could not convince her that dislike of her and hers was not the cause of my departure. Mr. Wallace called me a spoiled, wilful girl, but kissing me at the same time told me to always look upon him as a father, and his house as my home ; while his good wife implored me never to forget that whatever happened I should always find a welcome and warm hearts to love me at Wallan Wallan.

Yet in spite of my resolute display of

courage I felt extremely wretched as the train steamed out of the station, carrying me southward on my long lonely journey, and more than once I was like regretting my rashness and obstinacy, though my determination made me close my heart to the temptation. But I was cruelly alone, and as I looked out through the window at the fast flying country, I entertained many thoughts of a doubtful nature. Back into the past I went, the old glad past when we children, proud and happy in our youth and strength, knew nothing of the shame which was ours, and which was going to drag us down and down. Will said the taint would prove too much for us. God help us, I feared it would. Who could say but that which he and I had already suffered was but the commencement of a long list of ills which would leave us without hope of peace on earth, or hope of heaven hereafter? Is it a wonder I curled up in a corner of the carriage and wept as though my heart would break?



At last the great city was reached, and amid the bustle of porters and passengers who, laden with boxes and portmanteaux, seemed to be rushing hither and thither as though their very lives depended on their reaching a certain spot at a certain moment, I stood confusedly looking about when a servant approached me and inquired if I were Miss Hastings, the young lady for Mrs. Ballestier's, and upon my replying in the affirmative he seized my baggage and requested me to follow him, informing me as we went along that he had been sent to fetch me ; at which I felt distinctly relieved and silently thanked Mrs. Ballestier for her thoughtfulness. A neat little carriage of the wagonette species awaited us outside the station, into which vehicle I popped, and some half-hour later we drove up to the door of my new home, which was situated in one of the most select parts of South Yarra.

Upon descending from the vehicle in question I was immediately shown to my

room and at once proceeded to remove all stains of travel, and while I was yet engaged in this peculiar operation there came a knock at the door with the request that the mistress would be pleased to see me in the drawing-room when I was ready.

“In a moment,” I cried, and straightening my rather aggressive hair so that I might look as much like a companion as possible, I descended the stairs with just a little fluttering in the region of the heart.

Upon entering the drawing-room, which struck me as being most prettily furnished, I was at once made aware of the presence of a spruce little lady of from forty to forty-five years of age, elegantly dressed, and evidently one of those wonderful women of whom I had read so much, who will not permit that old rascal Time to say that they are old. Certainly upon a close inspection the skin of her face seemed not quite so smooth as a baby’s, and her mouth had a decidedly ugly twist about it; yet her

figure was wonderfully neat, and when you got a back view of her, and saw that stylish, well-dyed head set on the top of that well-clothed figure—a charming figure too, elastic and well-rounded—you might easily have mistaken her for a young woman of five-and-twenty. I know I did, and once I remembered telling her as much, and had I asked at that moment for a fifty pound rise I'm sure she would have given me it.

“So you are Miss Hastings?” she said, advancing to me with outstretched hand. I bowed. “I am Mrs. Ballestier,” she went on, “and am delighted you have come at last. I do hope you'll try to stay with me, because it is so tiresome to be continually changing. I think you'll find us pretty easy to get on with. Dora's a bit of a spoilt cat, to be sure, but that's her father's business. He won't have her interfered with. Otherwise he is an excellent man and not in the least obtrusive. By the way, you have seen your room—do you like it?”

I said I thought it an exceedingly cheerful one.

“So I think,” she said. “Mr. Ballestier wanted it for a study—as though anybody ever heard of a study being at the top of the house. But that’s just like him. Actually wanted to shift one of the handsomest bookcases in the library up there—which I wouldn’t have minded so much, because I might have bought another, had he not wanted to take the books as well. But that’s just like him. A queer creature, my dear, very eccentric; but not bad, really not bad.” And then, looking hard at me, she said suddenly, changing her theme like the true chatterbox she was, “Do you know, my dear, I like you, I like your looks: yes, I like you.”

I told her I thought it was very kind of her.

“Not at all,” was her airy answer, “not at all. I am never mistaken in my first impressions. I know we shall be excellent friends.”

I ventured to express the hope that we might be.

"Mrs. Wallace told me all about you," chattered the little lady, the words issuing from her lips with a fluency most astounding. "Quite an orphan, aren't you, poor thing? Shockingly sad, to be sure. How you must feel it. I'm afraid you'll think us awfully gay here, but the fact is black melancholy is a guest whom we entertain as little as possible. Selfish, you think? Possibly, but life is really too short to pass it in sighing. I'm sure I couldn't find the time. But you look a little fatigued, my dear. That bell. Thank you. I'm afraid I'm dreadfully lazy, and yet people say I'm the most energetic woman in Melbourne. Thank you, Porson," as a servant entered in answer to the summons. "We'll have some tea, please. I am sure a cup would prove acceptable at this moment?"

"I'm afraid I have the bush weakness for tea developed to an alarming extent."

"I am one with you there," she said

with a merry laugh, and when Porson entered with the tea-tray she proved the truth of her statement.

“And how did you leave the Wallaces?” she asked with her mouth full of bread-and-butter.

“They were all well,” I answered. “Mrs. Wallace is coming to town in a month’s time and hopes to have the pleasure of seeing you.”

“Dear old thing,” said Mrs. Ballestier patronizingly, “I shall be delighted to see her. It seems an age since we last met.”

“You are very old friends, are you not?”

“Well,” she said with a wonderful little smile, and a depreciating shrug of her slender shoulders, “not really very old. I have only known her since I was a girl. Of course she was a woman then,” she added by way of emphasis.

I was quick enough to perceive that the ground whereon I trod was, if not exactly holy, much too sacred for such profane feet as mine. I therefore backed

off it as swiftly and silently as I could, covering my movement, so to speak, by asking her if she had ever met my mother.

“No, my dear,” she replied, “I am sorry to say I never met her; but if she was anything like her daughter, my loss has been considerable.”

All of which sounded exceedingly pleasant, giving me confidence and making me feel at home. I had never anticipated meeting with such a generous and charming reception, and when I went to bed that night I felt a reassuring sense of peace which made me happier than I had been for many a long day.

My duties were not of the most arduous nature. About an hour in the morning I devoted to the education of the only child, Dora, a rather spoilt young lady of ten; but I'm afraid I did not succeed in transferring much knowledge into that head of hers, for of all the wilful children with whom I had ever come in contact, Miss Dora Ballestier was the most wilful.

Her ignorance was really appalling, and try as I might, I found that she neither could nor would learn. Looking upon me as her natural enemy, she, at my approach, would purse up her ugly little mouth—and it was wonderfully like her mother's—and defy me to teach her anything; but as I had no particular love for her I never gave her battle, not caring for the victory even if I were sure of gaining it. Once only I approached the mother with an account of the daughter's misdemeanours.

“My dear,” she said with a laugh, “Mr. Ballestier spoils her, in fact, we all spoil her—you see, she came rather late. We gave into her to begin with, and she's kept the upper hand ever since. She always does as she likes, and she won't do more than she likes, so whenever you find that she is not in the mood for lessons, I beg that you won't attempt to thwart her.”

“But it is scarcely fair to me,” I answered. “I am supposed to teach her;



yet how can I succeed in teaching her anything if she won't learn?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Ballestier with an amused look, "you really mustn't trouble yourself about that. I never expected that you would be able to teach her anything. It's all her father's doings. I've told him a thousand times that he's ruining the child, but he only laughs at me and says that if she won't learn she shan't be made to, and there's an end of it. And my dear," she added confidentially, "though Mr. Ballestier is one of the most easy-going creatures imaginable, he has a will and temper of his own."

I did not doubt it, though I had my doubts as to whether Mr. Ballestier's will and temper were very formidable things. Indeed, by what I had already seen of that worthy man, I considered him one of the most singularly simple personages with whom it had ever been my lot to become acquainted. It is true he was a member of the Upper House, and was consequently the Honourable Thomas Ballestier, or Old

Tom, as he was familiarly termed by his intimates ; not that he ever showed any decided partiality for the flavour of the juniper berry, his favourite beverage being a pint of tanglefoot in a pewter. "Tanglefoot," his own pet word, meant, when translated, colonial beer. But casting aside that spurious dignity of "Honourable," there was nothing very beautiful or imposing in Mr. Ballestier. He was not an impressive figure. Indeed he always reminded me of the swagmen whom I had seen in my early days trudging along the Wallan Road ; and in imagination I would set a swag on his back, put a clay pipe in his mouth and send him wandering along the dusty roads knowing that he was perfectly happy. It was what he had been accustomed to. I always thought his grand surroundings acted as a restraint upon him, and I am quite sure that he preferred the stables to his wife's drawing-room. Old Tom was not one who readily adapted himself to the superficialities of

refined life, and he rarely came to Melbourne unless so forced by some business transaction. He had a big run in the Western District which took him all his time to manage, at least so he declared. But if the truth must be told, Mr. Ballestier felt at home in the bush and decidedly at sea out of it. There he was monarch of all he surveyed, lord of broad lands and fleecy flocks, and he could go about all day in his shirt-sleeves, nor even put on his coat for dinner unless he felt cold, which was not very often, as he was as wiry as an old gum tree. There was a freedom in the bush which to a man of Old Tom's nature was absolutely indispensable to the enjoyment of life. An Englishman by birth, the son of a Hampshire labourer, he had emigrated, upon hearing the news of the great gold discoveries, to the El Dorado of the southern hemisphere, and after roughing it in almost every part of the colony, not to mention sundry excursions into different parts of New South Wales

and South Australia, he at last struck his "patch" in the now thriving township of Geelong. It was not a gold patch that he struck, though, indirectly, it turned to gold. He was then a strapping young fellow full of lusty manhood, and having accepted employment as assistant in a prosperous butcher's business, which business was carried on by a buxom widow whose husband had fallen a victim to his own meat—he choked himself one day at dinner—Mr. Ballestier made so much of his opportunities that three months after taking service he led his mistress to the altar. And thus it was that Mr. Ballestier found his patch, that patch increasing marvellously through his energy and skill. In a few years he was worth a tidy fortune, and as he was always singularly shrewd in his business transactions, he soon rose to the dignity of chief butcher in the town. About this time, and while he was yet elated with the pride of his position, his wife, whose bulk had increased enormously, died of

fatty degeneration, and thus, like her first husband, she proved a victim to the excellence of her own wares.

It is not said that the blow greatly affected Mr. Ballestier, but that it did there can be little doubt, for shortly after his better half had left him for a better world, he sold his shop and took up some land in the back country. Success followed this experiment; good seasons came one after the other, and in a few years Mr. Thomas Ballestier was one of the most prominent and prosperous squatters in the district. True, he had rather an exaggerated reputation for eccentricity of manner and dress, and people who came in contact with him were heard to declare that it was a crying injustice that a man who did not know how to live should be blessed with so much of the needful; but when he married Susan Hobson all this underwent a change. The new Mrs. Ballestier, who was an auctioneer's widow, and who, they said, had been "knocked down" to

her first husband by a disreputable father for a fair annuity, was a woman of push and enterprise. She had yearned all her life for an opportunity of distinguishing herself, and when it came she seized it with avidity. Once the nuptial knot was tied, and she was really Mrs. Ballestier, the rich Mrs. Ballestier, she began to put old Tom through his pacings. She cut his hair, trimmed his beard, and made him invest in a necktie, a thing he had hitherto disdained as an uncomfortable superfluity; indeed, she worked as never woman worked before to make her lord presentable. But all in vain. The Honourable Thomas would not take the polish.

“It’s no good, Soo,” he would say, after one of her irritating lessons. “All the rubbing in the world won’t polish me up—besides, my gal, I’m gettin’ a bit tired of the operation. No, Soo, you’d best let me go back to the bush. You needn’t come with me unless you like, but go I must.”

And go he accordingly did, and while he was away earning the dollars his wife stayed in town and spent them—a just proportion of labour, so Mrs. Ballestier said. She entertained royally; her dinners brought her quite a reputation, and to gain admission to one of her garden parties, and very charming they were, was the height of a social beginner's ambition. There one met everybody who was anybody, and though the somebodies were in reality very small fry, curiously assorted too, they were the best the country could produce, and if they had neither manners nor grandfathers, they had that which is of far more consequence—long purses. Occasionally the proceedings were enlivened by the presence of some globe-trotting lord or foreign count, but as a rule the distinguished visitors were like angels' visits—few and far between. This I knew was the cause of much secret regret to Mrs. Ballestier, who had the true British reverence of a title; but as she



could not induce the Honourable Thomas to visit his native land and set up as a nobility entertainer, she was forced to bow to the inevitable, spread her net and hope. Yet whenever she did get a chance of paying court to a title—though she hated knights, vulgar creatures—she took good care not to let it slip ; and at the time of my arrival at South Yarra she was exploiting the Honourable Peter Keestone, second son of the Earl of Arch, a young gentleman of the staff at Government House. What the Honourable Peter thought of her [must ever remain a mystery, if he ever thought at all—which I am inclined to doubt. He was not of the thinking kind ; yet if he did not love her as devotedly as she imagined, he made ample atonement for his delinquency by his attachment to her dinners. There could be no doubt of his affection for them. Usually he seemed to be a perverse sort of young man, irritable and exceedingly selfish, but when he sat down to dinner with us he became a transformed being.



His sleek face used to shine with pleasure; he smiled from forehead to chin; he was a beatific vision. And it was in such moments as these that Mrs. Ballestier reflected some of the glory of her adored one; she seemed to grow years younger; the words flew in sparkles from her lips, and if her wit was not of the finest water there were no connoisseurs at her table to perceive the flaws. At any rate, no one would ever imagine that this fascinating woman, this social leader, was brought up in a bush shanty, and that her father, old Mick Huggins, had died in the horrors after maintaining a drunken bout of some three weeks' duration.

This, then, was the mistress to whom I now found myself attached, and this the whirling household in which I had been set down. For at least a week I was considerably out of my element, but when I got my bearings, as a sailor would say, I steered a perfectly straight and true course. Nor did I find the place a hard one, or Mrs. Ballestier a very exacting mistress.

Beyond my little attentions to Dora of a morning, and they were dispensed with on the slightest pretence, I was with Mrs. Ballestier always. Indeed, she made as much of me after a week's acquaintance as though I had been her dearest friend, and she rarely went abroad without insisting upon me accompanying her.

"You have remained hidden long enough," she used to say. "This will be an excellent chance for you. You are pretty enough to drive any man crazy, and if you don't make good use of your opportunities I shall consider you a disgrace to the sex. Ah, if I only had your face and your years I would look at nothing lower than a prince. But you're not me—you don't push enough. Still, I think you ought to nail a lord at least." Mrs. Ballestier came out with some peculiar expressions at times, caught, I suppose, at the bar of the bush shanty.

"One must first get the opportunity," said I with a smile.

"Oh, yes, you'll do," she replied with

a knowing look. "The sylvan simplicity of Wallan Wallan is conducive to contemplation. Well, well, gather your harvest while you may. Remember, you'll never have these years to live again."

And so the harvest began, and in the giddy whirl of the next two months I laid in tares enough to last me for the rest of my life. Not that I didn't thoroughly enjoy the continual round of gaiety, the ceaseless stream of compliments, the animated, if empty, chatter. It was all new to me, and I was young enough to revel in the novelty. I was like a child let loose to play, and I played till I grew tired. Long before the season was over I, like Marianna in her Moated Grange, was aweary, and if I did not wish that I were dead, I should have felt no grievous pang at hearing that some of my acquaintances had passed under the face of things. I suppose one must be brought up to this sort of life to take any lengthened pleasure in it; but on me it palled most cruelly, and when Mr. Bal-

lestier was in town I was glad to stay at home to keep him company—for, of course, he would have none of his wife's gallivantings, as he used to put it. I must own, however, that it was invariably at Mrs. Ballestier's request that I remained at home on these occasions, for unless she knew the Hon. Tom was safe away at Barraclough (the name of his station), she displayed an uneasiness most marked, which made me wonder if she really thought he might come in his shirt sleeves to fetch her from some distinguished gathering, or if his presence might prove detrimental to sundry little arrangements, of which Mr. Peter Keestone was perfectly cognizant. And so after dinner I used to wend my way to Mr. Ballestier's smoking-room—and a miserable little back room it was too, with only a couple of comfortable chairs in it—and while he sat moodily pulling away at his pipe I would read to him all the farming, stock and station news from the pages of the *Australasian* and *Leader*,

and little articles and scraps of news I thought would interest him. And as long as I read he would go on smoking, filling and refilling his pipe from a huge plug of black tobacco which he always carried in one of his capacious waistcoat pockets.

At first he was rather shy of me and always called me Miss, but one day his wife happened to overhear him, and ever after he never forgot to add the Hastings. The Honourable Thomas must have been treated to an impressive curtain lecture that night. Yet to altogether break him of his shyness was not possible, and for a long time his apparent awe of me refused to quit him, and I have often laughed silently at the strange tactics employed by that grizzled old man to appear at ease before me. But by degrees the terror I had inspired wore off, and when one hot night, observing that the poor man was undergoing the agony of a violent perspiration, I suggested that he should take his coat off, he bounded to his feet like a school-boy who has been granted

an unexpected holiday, and proceeded to pour out his thanks in unmistakable terms. From that moment the barrier was broken down between us, and we became the best of friends. And the more I saw of him the more did he impress me, for I found that, notwithstanding his extreme simplicity of manners, there was much that was most excellent beneath his primitive exterior. He would come to me with all his troubles, and if he made a good or a bad deal on the exchange I was the first to know it; and at such moments the poor old man would hint pretty plainly that there was little sympathy between him and his wife. Even his child, he would add, the child he loved better than anything else in the world, seemed, in the matter of ill-treating him, to take her cue from the mother: but I knew well enough that the child's was a pleasant tyranny, for he was so exceedingly foolish over her that he would have condoned any outrage perpetrated by that wilful elf.

“She’s her mother, you see,” he would say in reference to some act of impudence or insubordination on the child’s part, “and as such expects everyone to make way for her. I suppose it’s born in ’em, natural like, and one oughtn’t to be too hard on what’s bred in the bone ; but it’s rather rough on a man when his own kid despises him.”

“How can you talk like that, Mr. Ballestier ?” I said. “Dora has her faults, like all of us, but I am sure she is an affectionate child at heart, and I know she loves you.” That I might have been romancing when I spoke of her affectionate nature, I am willing to admit, but that she loved her father in her selfish way is quite true. Indeed, I think he was the only person in the world for whom she really cared.

He looked at me, and as he looked his rugged face softened wonderfully. “I hope it may be so,” he said. “God knows, she’s dearer to me than my heart’s blood. I’m a lonely old man, Miss



Hastings, and I've led a queer, hard sort of life in my time, and I should like to be happy now—to have somebody to love me before I hand in my account."

Strange that this millionaire squatter, who among men of influence was one of the most influential, should be so poor a wretch as to be unable to purchase an ounce of true affection. And that he was a man worthy of love was fully realizable once one took the trouble to study his strange character; but he was quiet and secret in his ways, unobtrusive, almost surly in his shyness. And herein lay the cause of all the evil things which had been said of him, for so rugged a front did he present that the casual observer might almost be forgiven for thinking the outward semblance of the man a fair criterion of the inward. And yet it was not so, for this very brusqueness, uncouth, half-savage as it seemed, was but another form of shyness. In fact, Mr. Ballestier was haunted by the feeling that he was pretending to be



what he was not. He knew his own faults better than any of his friends knew them ; he knew he was not a gentleman, and that were he fifty times a millionaire he would still be plain Tom Ballestier, the Hampshire labourer's son, the man who had endured hardship upon hardship, hunger and thirst, heat and cold, with scarcely a rag to his back, and never a shoe to his foot ; whose days were passed in the laborious search for bread, and whose nights were spent beneath the trees with " nothing but the sky for a great-coat."

And he had won against it all—in spite of fate and its thousand obstacles. To me there was something grand in this rugged, lonely old man. I pitied him, too, with all my heart, but I am not sure that I did not love him more.

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